

REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT IN BULGARIA: WHY NATIONAL INTEGRATION POLICY MATTERS

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of the state's role in refugee employment in Bulgaria. In this line of thinking, it analyses the current labour market's needs in Bulgaria and the opportunity for more beneficiaries of international protection to compensate, at least to some extent, the manpower shortage in the country. The present study shows that in the current political and security context political actors and widespread local perceptions towards refugees negatively affect the integration of the latter, hindering the adoption of a national integration policy in Bulgaria. Concerning this, the paper argues that such a policy will improve refugees' employability in a long-term perspective as well as the relationship between them and the local population. Thus, it will benefit the national economy and act as a preventive tool in terms of threats to national security that may arise from the potential marginalization of beneficiaries of international protection.

Keywords: *refugee employment, refugee integration, beneficiaries of international protection, demography, third countries nationals, labour shortage*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment is a key feature of refugee integration. It serves as a bridge between the refugees and host society in the integration process and brings positives to all stakeholders. As in many other cases, the state apparatus has a leading role in this regard, especially in places where there are not diasporas, which often serves as a safety net for many migrants from the same countries of origin. Yet, due to mainly political reasons, some states seem still reluctant to provide the necessary tools to facilitate refugee integration. In this line of thinking, the Republic of Bulgaria continues to treat the mixed migration flows as a temporary phenomenon, hence most of the measures used to manage the situation on its borders and within the country have a temporary nature. In this backdrop, Bulgaria has been facing for years significant migrant pressure on its southern border and currently finds itself in a challenging security environment, defined by armed conflicts and a great number of asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

It can be argued that refugee integration in Bulgaria has been regarded by political actors as a topic of secondary importance, which is evident from the lack of political will to implement adequate measures, including a new refugee integration national programme, since the last one concluded in 2013. Nonetheless, this issue has generally gained more interests among non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria than within the academia. Therefore, this paper is aimed at underlying the importance of both central and local authorities in refugee integration as a tool not only for improving refugees' chances of employability, but also as a preventive measure against certain threats to national security.

The study is based on a secondary research, analysing publicly available information from national and international organizations, including information provided by the relevant Bulgarian state institutions according to the Access to Public Information Act, in an attempt to answer the following research question: What should be the role of the state apparatus in Bulgaria in the relationship between refugee integration and refugee employment against the background of the notable irregular migration, negative demographic processes and public attitudes towards asylum seekers, and shortage of labour force in the country?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Employment has always been of paramount importance to humans. Although even today in many places around the world people are still underpaid or may be defined as working poor, that is, employees living in households that fall below the poverty line in a given country (International Labour Organization 2024), employment is possibly the single most visible factor that makes one to be part of a community. In fact, many scholars argue that employment is also very likely the most important factor when it comes to successful refugee integration (Feeney 2000, p. 343, Andersen et al. 2023). Concerning the latter, according to Ager and Strang (2008, pp. 169-171), successful integration includes four domains, of which employment is in the first one. Wolffhardt et al. (2019, p. 69) indicates that employment not only provides income, but it also significantly contributes to one's prospects of long-term residence and possibly citizenship, which eventually benefits the local economy and society through the refugees' skills, qualifications and even through better educational opportunities for their children.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also indicates the economic self-reliance an essentially important factor for successful refugee integration, highlighting that employment is closely related to one's capacity to equally participate in the host society, facilitating the communication in the host country language and the acquisition of knowledge about the local culture and practices (UNHCR 2024).

The need for social inclusion through employment, among other means, is expressed by the refugees themselves, as various studies argue (Korac 2002; Baranik et al. 2019). Actually, by not providing employment and training/educational activities, the host state risks to contribute to the marginalization of many refugees and asylum seekers, as Norström and Norberg (2012, p. 26) indicate in their study on the reception and introduction of asylum seekers in Gothenburg, Sweden.

The measures aimed at improving refugee employability, however, in most cases are part of an integration policy, and not sporadically implemented in practice. Yet, the integration issue is approached differently across the countries, depending on various factors such as historical context and policy choices (Ferris 2020). Moreover, as Elnakib et al. (2024, p. 11) rightfully note, the refugee integration agenda continues to be set primarily by international organizations and high-income countries, which acts as a disincentive in other countries, as the latter find themselves in situations where it is not possible for them to provide the same type of services and opportunities for newcomers. This is particularly visible in countries where irregular migration is a major political topic. Further ambiguity in this regard is brought by the fact that refugee integration depends on a host of other factors as well, for example, types of immigration, existing integration policy and practice, attitudes of the local populations towards refugees and migrants, as well as the economic and social context (Phillimore 2021). Also, asylum systems in many host countries have been regarded as undermining refugee integration due to long periods of waiting for a decision on asylum applications which hinders the refugees' employability (Hainmueller et al. 2016).

Based on what has been mentioned so far, the role of the state is of primary importance to refugee integration, including to their labour market integration. This can be seen in the light of a few main reasons. First and foremost, refugees are in a more vulnerable situation in respect to other immigrants, especially if compared to those moving for clearly economic motives (Hynie 2018, p. 266). Initially, the employment rates of the former are significantly lower than those of the latter, as due to the forced circumstances refugees usually arrive in the host country without having the necessary skills for its labour market (Brell et al. 2020, p. 105). Implementing a national integration policy may serve as a tool to counter local prejudices towards refugees through the social, economic and cultural inclusion of the latter in the receiving country. If necessary, such policies may be more coercive as, for example, in the case of Denmark (Ferris 2020, p. 204). The introduction and implementation of national integration policies can also positively impact the interaction between the refugees and the local population, as the integration process is greatly influenced by public opinions and attitudes, which in turn affect and are affected by governmental policies (Hynie 2018).

3. REFUGEES AND THE LABOUR MARKET IN BULGARIA

The question of the place of refugees in the labour market in Bulgaria rather remains aside from the main topic of their presence in the country as a whole. The main reasons for this are widespread various, controversial and sometimes even unfaithful claims and political interpretations and a lack of state capacity for adequate management of these processes. In fact, apart from scholars and nongovernmental activist, probably few people in Bulgaria in recent times have even thought of refugees as human recourses who can benefit the national labour market and economy. The fact that the country has so far made very little to integrate in its job market highly educated (and not only) temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine despite the similar ethnic, cultural and religious ties between Ukrainian and Bulgarians backs up such a claim. Current labour and demographic trends also debunk some negative perceptions about the refugee link to the local labour market.

3.1. Current labour market trends in Bulgaria

The available data about labour and refugees related statistics in Bulgaria, gathered by various national and international institutions, indicate certain trends. For example, between 2014 and 2023 a 10% decrease in the number of the working force was registered, while the number of unemployed people decreased almost three times in the same period (Fig. 1).

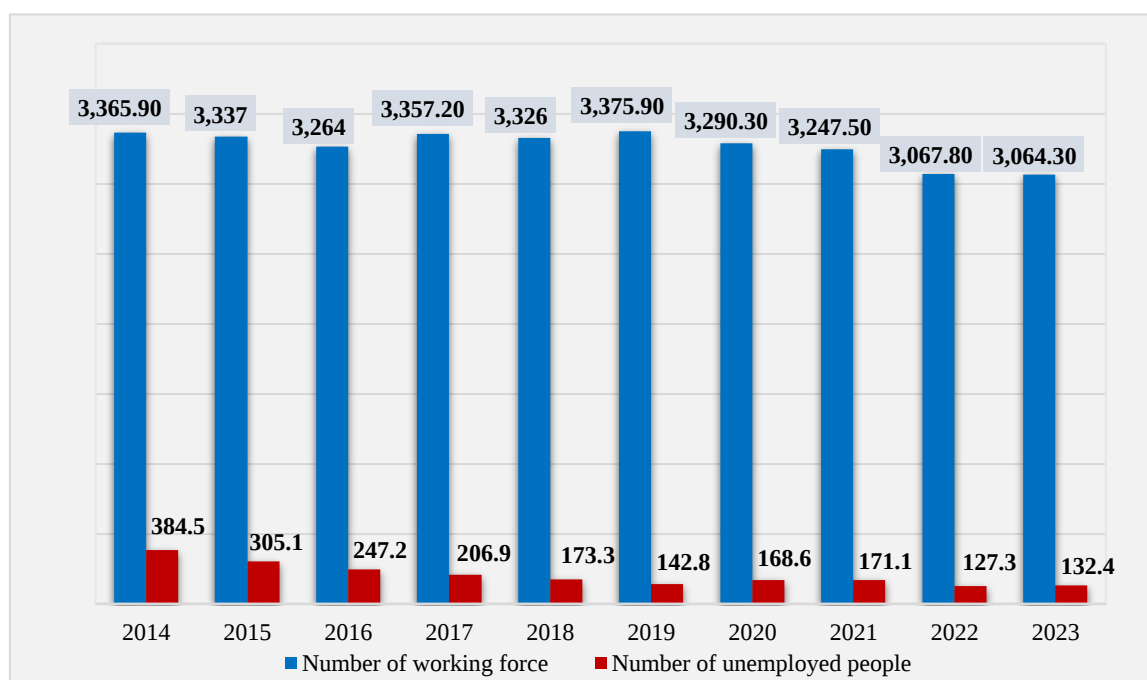


Fig. 1. Number of the working force and unemployed people in Bulgaria in the period 2014-2023 (in thousands)

Source: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria

Obviously, the relatively low unemployment rates indicate some macroeconomic stability in the country. At the same time, it is also one of the reasons for Bulgaria to move a little bit closer to the achievement of the Sustainable development goals (SDGs), with the unemployment rate target being on track to be achieved until 2030. Actually, in the 2024 Sustainable Development Report (SDR), the country is ranked 41 out of 167 countries in its overall performance towards the SDGs achievements, which represents three positions up compared to the 2023 edition of the SDR (Sachs et al. 2024, p. 134). It is worth noting that refugees and generally forced displacement are part of several of the SDGs, hence Bulgaria can find one more reason to do better in this regard.

Apart from the low unemployment rates, however, many businesses in Bulgaria have been recently facing a manpower shortage. According to some data, the labour shortage is predominantly visible where highly skilled staff is needed, which is due to emigration, skill shortages and gaps, and a decreasing economically active population (in 2021 a 13,6% decrease was registered compared to 2011) (EURES 2023). However, other industries such as the tourism sector, are also affected by this trend. As a matter of fact, the labour shortage in Bulgaria has been so persistent, that various industries have recently demanded the state to facilitate the requirements for hiring workers from third countries (Ivanova 2024). Concerning this, some estimations suggest that the staffing shortage in Bulgaria varies between 250 000 and 300 000 (Morina 2024).

As for the foreign labour force in the country, according to data of the Bulgarian National Revenue Agency (NRA), provided to the author of this study through the Access to Public Information Act, as of 9 July 2024 the number of foreign nationals with active employment contracts in Bulgaria is approximately 63 000. More than 16 500 of them are employed in the hotel and restaurant sector, while some 4 800 foreign nationals work in the field of information technologies. How many of these 63 000 foreign workers are beneficiaries of international protection, however, cannot be said as employers do not provide such information to the NRA, respectively, the agency does not receive and store such details.

3.2. Asylum seekers and refugees in the light of the labour market trends

The number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria over the last ten years has been mainly linked to armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It can be argued that this, among other factors such as radicalization and terrorist attacks in the EU carried out by people from countries of origin from the MENA region, has negatively affected the local population's perception towards the mixed migration flows. Apart from some national security related concerns, many Bulgarian citizens express a fear of losing their jobs due to the presumable high number of asylum seekers and refugees in the country. According to a UNHCR survey, the share of people in Bulgaria who feared that they may lose their workplace because of the possibility that refugees may live close to their homes almost doubled in just three years, rising from 13% in 2018 to 23% in 2020 (UNHCR Bulgaria 2021, p. 12). Against this background, Table 1 below indicates the asylum seekers in the working age (18-64) as well as the total number of those granted international protection and their respective share of both the total working force and the unemployed people in Bulgaria.

Year	Total Number of asylum seekers	Asylum seekers aged 18-64 *			People granted refugee status or subsidiary protection		
		Number	Share of the total working force in Bulgaria	Share of the unemployed people in Bulgaria	Number	Share of the total working force in Bulgaria	Share of the unemployed people in Bulgaria
2014	11 081	7 460	0,22%	1,94%	7 000	0,21%	1,82%
2015	20 391	14 625	0,44%	4,79%	5 597	0,17%	1,83%
2016	19 418	12 370	0,38%	5,00%	1 351	0,04%	0,55%
2017	3 700	2 480	0,07%	1,20%	1 704	0,05%	0,82%
2018	2 536	1 680	0,05%	0,97%	730	0,02%	0,42%
2019	2 152	2 075	0,06%	1,45%	481	0,01%	0,34%
2020	3 525	2 400	0,07%	1,42%	821	0,02%	0,49%
2021	10 999	7 251	0,22%	4,24%	2 019	0,06%	1,18%

2022	20 407	15 157	0,49%	11,91%	4 373	0,14%	3,44%
2023	22 518	16 798	0,55%	12,69%	5 788	0,19%	4,37%

Table 1. Asylum seekers as a share of the working force and the unemployed people in Bulgaria in the period 2014 – 2023

Source: State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, Eurostat and own calculations

**the number of asylum seekers aged 18-64 for the years 2014-2018 is calculated based on data from the State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria*

Table 1 reveals that the asylum seekers aged 18-64 have been representing a very small share of the total working force in Bulgaria over the last 10 years, and the same has been true for those granted refugee status of subsidiary protection. The situation is, however, different when it comes to their share of the unemployed Bulgarian citizens, particularly in the case of asylum seekers. Yet, this hardly can be accepted as a valid factor to justify concerns among the local population of losing jobs due to current mixed migration flows. What is more, in 2014 the number of unemployed people in Bulgaria was three times bigger compared to their number in 2023. In addition, other factors such as lack of national refugee integration policy and slow administrative procedures continue to hinder the beneficiaries of international protection employability.

Even at the EU level, we cannot find trends that back assumptions according to which the local population is at risk of losing their job places at the expense of refugees. Concerning this, Figure 2 below reveals the unemployment rate in the last 10 years in some member states that have accepted more than 100 000 asylum seekers.

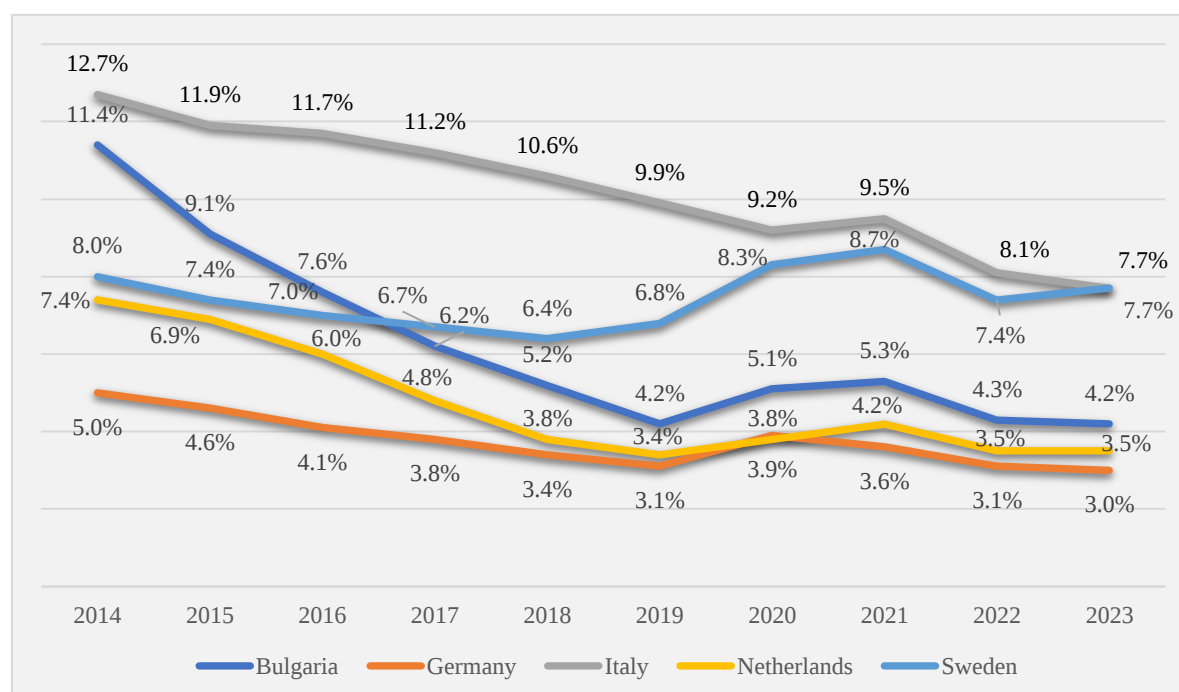


Fig. 2. Unemployment rate in selected EU countries that accepted more than 100 000 asylum seekers since 2013, compared to Bulgaria

Source: World Bank, 2024

Figure 2 indicates that the unemployment rate generally decreased between 2014 and 2023, although the total number of asylum applicants granted protection status in the EU reached approximately 3,8 million in the same period (Eurostat 2024). While in the case of Sweden one can point out the higher unemployment rate compared to the other selected EU countries, it should be noted that certain factors should be taken into consideration. Among these are the existing disparities between various counties within the country and the inadequate or low skills of many adults which do not fit the needs of the employers (OECD 2017). In addition, half of the those scoring at or below 1 in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills, were migrants which marks a serious challenge in their integration in the labour market (Ibid.). Also, since between the years 2014 and 2023, some 400 000 individuals sought asylum in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2024), it is reasonable to think that the integration of beneficiaries of international protection will take time, which may affect national labour statistics. As it is argued in an OECD survey, the integration of low-skilled immigrants is a time requiring process, that may increase the unemployment rate for some time (OECD 2017a, p. 22).

4. DISCUSSION

Taking into consideration the requests of a number of businesses in Bulgaria for the government to loosen the rules for hiring third countries nationals, one cannot miss to note certain features regarding the nexus between some local population attitudes, the foreign workforce in the country and the lack of a national refugee integration policy.

4.1. Regular economic migrants from third countries vs. beneficiaries of international protection from third countries?

The unemployment statistics presented in the graphics above demonstrate that some losing jobs-related perceptions among the local population are not based on hard facts. Put it simply, refugees and people granted subsidiary protection, under the current circumstances, cannot be regarded as competition for the jobs of the local population. Instead, one can argue that those are primarily politically motivated or, more specifically, politically instigated through various political discourses disseminated through social media and other channels.

On the other hand, in recent years thousands of third countries nationals have worked in Bulgaria (Fig. 3), in many cases as seasonal workers. Yet somehow this has not so far made it onto the country's political agenda as another alarmist issue. One of the reasons for this may be that there are mainly perceived as temporary residents who work legally in the country. With regards to this, it is to be noted that while foreign workers from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have been so far seen by Bulgarian employees as easily adapting to the new job and environment, there has been recently a strong interest to job opportunities in Bulgaria from workers from Pakistan and some South-Asian countries such as India, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Morina, 2024). Although in all of the latter operate some terrorist and separatist militant groups, at the time of writing there have not been any protests or other similar actions conducted by the Bulgarian population against the idea for third countries nationals to compensate for the lack of local labour force. Hence, it may be assumed that those taking a stance against accepting refugees and generally beneficiaries of international protection, are either uninformed or misinformed in the case of some parts of the local populations, or simply politically motivated in the case of political actors.

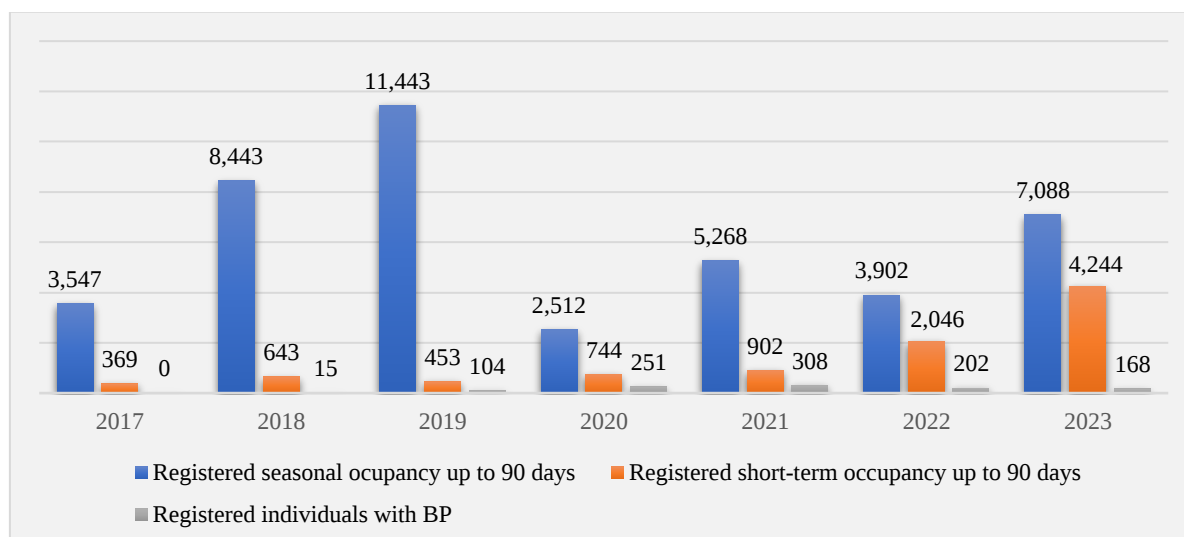


Fig. 3. Registered short-term employment of third countries nationals according to declarations submitted by employers for the period from 2017 to 31.12.2023

Source: Employment Agency of the Republic of Bulgaria

It should be highlighted that by accepting tens of thousands regular migrants from third countries for the Bulgarian labour market's needs, even if temporarily only, the country may become a desired final migrant destination, and not a transit one. In fact, diaspora is often indicated as a pull-up factor for immigrants. Concerning this, Blazhevskva (2017, p. 58) argues that existing diaspora facilitates emigration to countries of final destination as it may serve as a contact point and source of necessary information for the newcomers. Nimkar & Frouws (2018, p. 14) specify that while the role of diasporas in migration trends is not sufficiently researched, they indeed facilitate irregular migration, often reluctantly, including by providing information to potential migrants, for example, possible routes and risks the latter may encounter. Beine et al. (2010) argue that larger diaspora networks not only positively influence the size of the international migrant flows, but they also favour low-skilled migration. In other words, political actors who take conservative positions regarding the place of refugees in the country's labour market, have not taken, at least for the time being, such positions against regular migration of third countries nationals for the needs of the Bulgarian business.

When it comes to refugees and migrants as a whole, it is generally argued that their integration, although initially requiring financial resources, over time will benefit the host state and society due to the payment of taxes and their participation in the labour market (e.g. Ghertner et al. 2024). Despite the availability of data showing the importance of migrants for the labour market and generally for a given national economy, however, this issue remains both economically and politically bound. In periods of political crisis and geopolitical changes, it contributes to the division of society and in recent times has affected parliamentary and presidential elections across many countries. This has been particularly visible in the EU over the last ten years, where irregular migration has been even in the basis of entire political campaigns. As a result, even when a country has to turn to personnel from third countries for the needs of its national labour market, some political discourses try to direct this matter to an open-door policy for highly qualified migrants only. Hence, once can assume that is permissible to accept third countries nationals when the latter are qualified staff for whom the state does not need to invest significant funds, including for their integration, while at the same time they are expected to boost the host state's economy without the risk of falling into marginalized groups.

Against this background, the integration of beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria, including in the labour market, remains of a secondary importance. For instance, although many studies highlight the importance of investments in migrants' education and language proficiency after their arrival (Chiswick & Miller 1995; Lindley & Van Hear 2007, Grünhage-Monetti & Braddell 2017), this

does not seem to be a priority in Bulgaria. Instead, integration initiatives such as language and orientation courses, often seen as successful integration tools, are left to NGOs or not implemented due to lack of capacity.

The challenges of refugee integration deriving from the lack of a more active role of the central government is evident. For example, the Council of Europe (2018) highlights that the expected decentralization of integration responsibilities to local authorities has a questionable effectiveness, as no municipality has volunteered to conclude Integration Agreements, despite the available funds for their implementation. Also, Bulgaria does not seem to stick to what is stated in the European Commission's Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, that is, that 'the process of integration requires that the host society, create the opportunities for the full economic, social, cultural, and political participation'. Probably as a possible reason for that may be indicated again that many migrants and even the Bulgarian authorities themselves, consider Bulgaria mainly as a transit country, which does not require long-term solutions. Given the persistent mixed migration flows towards the EU, however, it is bewildering that Bulgaria has still not accepted a new refugee integration programme, since the last one ceased to be in effect in 2013. With the current political instability, frequent parliamentary elections and the predominantly negative perceptions of the locals towards asylum seekers, it is unlikely that this matter will soon occupy its important place in the country's political agenda. It should not be surprising then that probably not many politicians will put efforts and take the responsibility in doing something, that will require a long time to provide concrete and visible positive results. In short, as in the case of other important reforms that need time to be implemented in practice and give the desired outcomes, the political actors do not see incentives to take such initiatives if they expect not to be in power long enough to take the well-deserved credit, if there is such.

It is worth noting that the need for a new national integration policy that takes into account the opportunities that open up to Bulgaria as a result of mixed migration flows, as well as the development of a long-term perspective on refugee related matters, is often confirmed by the dynamic security environment. One recent example in this regard is the decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria from 25 January 2024 to extend once again the term of temporary protection for Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria, in this case, until 4 March 2025 (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2024).

4.2. The local population as a factor affecting the introduction of a refugee integration policy

As previously mentioned, politics are influenced by widespread perceptions, since political actors count on the citizens' votes to get elected in the central/local government authorities. Concerning this and apart from the fears of losing jobs due to a possible increased number of refugees on Bulgarian territory, several studies indicate that a large percentage of the Bulgarians believe that the integration of refugees in the country simply cannot happen. In a nationally representative survey on public attitudes towards refugees in Bulgaria, conducted in 2016, nearly 60% of the respondents regarded refugees as a threat to the country's national security (Mediapool 2016). What is more, those opinions were relatively constant and not influenced by the gender, education, age, place of residence and ideological views of the respondents (Ibid.). Yet, nearly 50% of the survey respondents answered that the integration of refugees in the country is hindered due to a lack of state capacity in terms of providing the necessary conditions, while 38.5% believed that the refugee integration was not possible due to the different culture and religion of the latter.

In another survey conducted in 2017 for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bulgaria, the share of respondents considering that refugees would not be able to integrate due to existing cultural and religious differences between them and the local communities reached 54.6% (UNHCR Bulgaria 2017). Similar attitudes continued to be spread among the Bulgarian population in the years that followed as well. According to 72.8% of the respondents in a nationally representative study conducted in 2020, successful refugee integration in Bulgaria was not possible due to various reasons such as the different culture and religion of the refugees and their reluctance to stay in the country (Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants 2020). Also, in a survey, carried out in Harmanli and Sofia only, where four of a total five migrant reception centres in Bulgaria are located, 71.5% of the respondents in Harmanli and 58.8% in the capital city declared that beneficiaries of international

protection could not be integrated socially and economically in the country (Dimitrov & Pavlov 2023, pp. 34-35). However, most of the interviewees (58.3% in Harmanli and 62.5% in Sofia) indicated that the state had not done enough to integrate refugees, while 21.5% and 14.7% of the respondents, respectively, shared the opposite view (Ibid.).

It is debatable whether the negative perceptions of some locals are influenced by the asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection related costs, or by the negative demographic processes in the country. However, while negative opinions towards refugees and generally towards migrants from third countries (with the exception of those of Bulgarian origin) prevail in the country, its economy continues to experience an acute labour shortage. At the same time, a number of challenges hinder refugee integration in the national labour market. According to the Council of Europe (2019, p. 13) as such can be indicated insufficient command of the host society language, absence of or slow procedures regarding qualifications and skills recognition, and even discrimination by employers. The latter, however, can be overcome to some extent by the economic situation in Bulgaria which imposes the employers to turn to third countries nationals due to the labour force shortage. Also, while beneficiaries of international protection have the right to work under the same conditions as those of Bulgarian citizens and do not need a work permit to do so (Asylum and Refugees Act 2024), the national labour market's needs should not be ignored. Therefore, the refugees need to update their skills, qualifications and knowledge of the Bulgarian language, as well as to obtain the necessary education degree, to improve their employment opportunities (UNHCR Bulgaria & Catro Bulgaria 2018, p. 31). By some accounts, in the next few years the labour shortage may reach some 500 000 people, of which nearly half will need to have a higher education degree, and the rest - a secondary education one (Nikolov 2024).

Given all the above mentioned, the role of the host state in the integration of refugees, including in their labour market integration, is of primary importance. The national and local authorities can make a lot to facilitate the integration process, especially in terms of refugees' access to jobs. While providing integration courses and their successful completion may improve the refugees' chances of being employed and reaching higher job positions (de Vroome & van Tubergen 2010, p. 399), the host state's role is not limited to only this. For example, as Andersen et al. (2023) argue, a dispersed refugee settlement is crucial for the implementation of integration policies, highlighting some potential advantages. As such they indicate the redistribution of financial and social costs between the local authorities, the alleviation of housing demand in places with limited capacity, as well as better interaction with the host society and population (Ibid.). At the same time, however, the prospects for the refugees' participation in the labour market depend also on the distribution of people by gender, because due to the peculiarities of the religious affiliation of people from the countries of origin, women are mostly economically inactive (Nikolova and Chernicherska 2016, p. 14).

Whereas the main responsibility for the refugee integration, including in the labour market, lies with the host government, some burden for the unsuccessful integration of refugees in Bulgaria may be attributed to a few controversial decisions at the EU level and unilateral decisions by individual member states. For example, the allocation of 6 billion euro to Turkey to cope with the refugees on its territory, many of whom otherwise would likely become part of the irregular migration to the EU, has further increased the EU's dependence on third countries. At the national level, similar decisions concern border closures, such as in Sweden and Austria, as well as the Germany's decision to unilaterally reject the Dublin Agreement, leading to increased feelings of resentment and fear (Collier & Betts, 2017, p. 228). Despite all this, the Bulgarian governments should act mainly from a long-term perspective, thus putting the necessary efforts to properly manage the mixed migration flows. This includes also the integration in the local labour market of beneficiaries of international protection.

In the opposite case, by not integrating refugees, certain negative outcomes can be expected. Franzén (1997 in Bevelander & Lundh, 2007) argues that often refugees are seen as a homogenous group while in fact they are a diverse population. This combined with a mainly negative attitude towards the newcomers' skills, leads to circumstances favouring the creation of pattern of clientization of refugees to the host country's social security system (Ibid.). What is more, if not successfully integrated, beneficiaries of international protection may become an easy target for recruitment from criminal or even terrorist groups with all respective negative outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

Bulgaria has been facing a demographic crisis for years, which is deepening with each passing year. At the same time, the labour market suffers from a shortage of manpower, and the domestic market needs more people to support the economic growth and the economic and social development of the country with a particular focus on some of its regions. Bulgaria is therefore faced with the choice of either relying on immigration of third countries nationals, or ignoring this option with the risk of deepening the problems stemming from the negative demographic situation. As this paper shows, the lack of a refugee integration policy is affected by both political actors and the local population attitudes, which are also interrelated.

In this line of thinking, the state is expected to take the necessary timely and adequate measures by properly controlling the mixed migration flows, taking into consideration the local context, including the labour market conditions and demographic processes. Concerning this, Bulgaria has the opportunity to take a proactive position regarding the integration of refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection. Their integration also means their integration into the country's labour market, which will benefit both parties involved. The circumstances under which they arrive in Bulgaria, that generally apply to most of the host states, however, suggest that their integration in the labour market requires longer time in respect to other immigrant groups. Hence, this is one more reason why a national integration policy, which is aimed at long-term solutions, should be implemented in the country as soon as possible.

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