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**SPECIFICATIONS FOR NATIONAL  
REPORT PART 2  
CONTRIBUTING TO THE  
EMN ANNUAL REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM 2022  
IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**

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# **1. SCOPE OF THE EMN ANNUAL NATIONAL REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM 2022**

This report provides an overview of the most important policy actions and debates as well as legislative changes and concrete measures in the field of migration, asylum and integration in Bulgaria for the period 1 January – 31 December 2022. The report has been prepared by the National Contact Point of the European Migration Network (EMN) in accordance with Article 9(1) of the Council Decision of 14 May 2008 establishing a European Migration Network (2008/381/EU) in line with the guidelines of the European Migration Network regarding its structure.



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# ANNUAL REPORT 2022 ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

## NATIONAL REPORT (PART 2)

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the most significant developments in the field of migration and asylum in the Republic of Bulgaria in 2022. Over the past year, the country, in the face of state institutions and the civil sector, has faced the challenge of taking effective measures and policies in the context of an intensified migration situation.

The report provides up-to-date statistics, a summary overview of legislative and policy developments, a list of activities and research in the field of integration of third-country nationals (TCNs). The dynamic political context in the Republic of Bulgaria in 2022 is characterised by the vote of no confidence in the ruling government by June, the dissolution of the 47th National Assembly, the formation of a caretaker cabinet in August by the President of Bulgaria and the holding of early parliamentary elections in October 2022. Following the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army on 24 February 2022, the main issues that have been part of the party and political discourse in the country have been related to Bulgaria's actions regarding the reception and assistance of Ukrainian refugees.

In 2022, Bulgaria continued to take a range of actions to improve national legislation and bring it into line with the EU law. A number of legislative changes have been drafted to refine national provisions in the field of labour migration and Bulgarian citizenship. The actions of the Bulgarian institutions in the management of migration in 2022 are guided by the principles of the rule of law, political neutrality, objectivity and impartiality, ensuring conditions for respecting the rights of people and their dignity.

Cooperation between state institutions and civil society organisations as well as cooperation in the field of migration between Bulgaria and other EU Member States and countries of origin of asylum seekers in Bulgaria continued successfully.

As across Europe, the legal regime of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine has been activated in Bulgaria in 2022. Decision No. 144 of the Council of Ministers of

10 March 2022 granted temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Bulgarian authorities have taken measures aimed at defining reception conditions, and providing support to fleeing Ukrainians. Bulgarian society, through the civil sector and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has successfully contributed to the integration and resolution of other problems faced by Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria.

## **LEGAL MIGRATION**

Regarding legal migration, in 2022 there is a trend towards an increase in the number of applications submitted by employers and positive opinions/permits granted by the Employment Agency to foreigners for access to the Bulgarian labour market compared to 2021 and 2020.

In 2022, legislative amendments were promulgated in the State Gazette to introduce procedures for more effective harmonisation of national legislation on legal migration with EU law, some of which aim to refine national legislation on a wide range of labour migration topics.

During the reporting period, a Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility, which selectively transposes individual provisions of Directive 2021/1883/EU on the conditions and procedures of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment, was submitted to the National Assembly. An additional provision in the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility includes amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria and its implementing regulations, the Law on Bulgarian Identity Documents and the Law on Employment Promotion.

## **INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION**

In 2022, the implementation of the national policy in the field of international protection and asylum continued in accordance with international law in the field of international protection and in view of the fulfilment of Bulgaria's responsibilities and commitments as an EU Member State. State institutions acted in a situation of increased migratory pressure. A range of capacity building trainings on international protection were conducted during the year. Cooperation between the State Agency for Refugees and other European countries as well as countries of origin of refugees has been strengthened.

## **MINORS AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS**

During the year there was a significant increase compared to 2021 in the number of unaccompanied minors, who applied for international protection in Bulgaria. Most of the unaccompanied children who sought protection were accommodated in the two separate Safe Zones for Unaccompanied Minors in two of the Registration and Reception Centres (RRC) in Sofia.

By Decision No. 879 of the Council of Ministers of 09.11.2022 during the reporting period, the "Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee (2030)" was adopted, in which special attention was paid to the category of unaccompanied minors when identifying the main target groups and specifically the group of refugee and migrant children.

## **INTEGRATION**

In the field of integration, during the reporting period, numerous thematic events were held within the framework of the process of social adaptation and cultural orientation of asylum seekers, either independently by the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (SAR) or jointly with representatives of the NGO sector in the field of migration within the framework of projects for the integration of third-country nationals. Policies on the inclusion of asylum seekers in the labour market and the provision of support in the education process for migrant children of compulsory and pre-school age continue. A range of forums and conferences on migration issues were held during the year. A variety of publications on integration has also been published by academics and the NGO sector. Numerous project activities were implemented to support the integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international or temporary protection in Bulgaria.

## **CITIZENSHIP AND STATELESS PERSONS**

There is a decrease in the number of persons acquiring Bulgarian citizenship in 2022 compared to 2021. During the reporting period, a Law amending the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship was adopted by promulgation in the State Gazette (No. 26 of 01.04.2022), introducing significant changes related to investment-based citizenship, such as the abolition of the possibility to acquire such citizenship.

## **BORDERS, VISAS, SCHENGEN**

During the reporting year, the institutions responsible for security and border management of the Republic of Bulgaria and the EU continued to successfully implement their activities. Additional measures have been undertaken to improve the efficiency of border control by modernising national information systems to achieve operational synchronisation with European information systems. In order to maintain the capacity of cross-border cooperation in crisis situations, a programme between Turkey and Bulgaria was adopted. Amendments concerning the visa regime for citizens of the Russian Federation have been introduced and a National Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria for capacity development, border management and return of illegally staying third-country nationals for 2022 has been prepared.

## **IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND SMUGGLING**

During the past year, the effective work to counter irregular migration continued. There has been an increase in the number of migrants apprehended for irregular stay in the country. In 2022, the General Directorate of Border Police continued the implementation of activities to counter smuggling.

## **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

In the field of combating trafficking in human beings in 2022, numerous activities and projects aimed at raising public awareness on these issues for prevention purposes were implemented. Various trainings and initiatives were conducted during the reporting period aimed at developing national capacity to counter and prevent trafficking in human beings and enhancing the capacity of officials working in the fight against trafficking in human beings. On 29 September 2022, the National Programme for the Prevention and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protection of Victims for 2022 was adopted. Strengthening cooperation with EU Member States, the Council of Europe, the UN, the OSCE, third countries, etc. remained of key importance for the Bulgarian authorities.

## **RETURN AND READMISSION**

During the year, the activities on forced and voluntary return of third-country nationals illegally residing on the territory of Bulgaria continued. The Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior became part of Frontex Agency's Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) platform.

# **INTRODUCTION**

In 2022 as in past years Bulgaria managed migration trends by trying to adapt to a more adjusted approach which seeks to find a balance between both security aspects and integration measures as well as the duty of respecting human rights within the asylum system and to successfully counter irregular migration.

The report provides a brief overview of the general structure of the institutional and legal elements of the law enforcement system in the Republic of Bulgaria in the field of migration, integration and asylum and outlines the main changes that have occurred in 2022. The document contains up-to-date and impartial, reliable information and has been prepared in response to the analysis needs of the European institutions.



## **METHODOLOGY**

The information has been collected from publicly available sources. Information on the legal aspects of the report is drawn from free sources and subscriptions to legal information systems, as well as from the websites of the National Assembly and the institutions and organisations whose opinions are cited.

The report is based on data from a wide range of sources, which are intended to provide up-to-date information and to ensure an impartial assessment. Information from government documents, strategies, action plans, annual reports, published studies, etc. has been used. The opinions and publications of non-governmental or international organisations are also included.

## **TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

The terminology used in the report is based on the European Migration Network glossary. Individual terms that refer in particular to Bulgarian legislation are supplemented by explanations in the text itself or in footnotes.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF ASYLUM AND MIGRATION DEVELOPMENTS

### 2.1 POLITICAL CONTEXT IN 2022

After the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army on 24 February 2022, the war in Ukraine was a leading topic in the political and public debate in Bulgaria in 2022.

Although Bulgaria does not share a common border with Ukraine, in the first week of the conflict alone the number of people from Ukraine entering Bulgarian territory exceeded 25,000. According to the data of the Bulgarian Border Police, as of 10 May 2022, 248,085 persons from Ukraine had entered Bulgaria, of whom 104,067 remained in the country, or 41.95%. The need for an adequate response by the Bulgarian state to the Ukrainian crisis necessitated the establishment of an Operational Coordination Group (OCG) under the Council of Ministers by order of then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov on 4 March 2022. The following six working groups were also established: border control, entry into the country and proceedings for international or temporary protection; transport; accommodation; social issues; employment; public information and public relations. A mechanism for coordination with the NGO sector was also established through a special group under the Civil Society Development Council (CSDC), which consists of 14 NGOs selected after a national vote, and was confirmed by a decision of the Council of Ministers on 16 February 2022. More than 30 NGOs providing services to refugees from Ukraine participate in the Task Force.

On 4 May 2022, the 47th National Assembly approved the provision of humanitarian, financial and military assistance to Ukraine, in accordance with Bulgaria's capabilities.

In June 2022, the leader of the "There is Such a Nation" (ITN) political party, one of the four parties in the then coalition government with Prime Minister Kirill Petkov, withdrew his party from the ruling majority. A few days later, the GERB political party tabled a vote of no confidence in the Petkov cabinet in parliament, while the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), ITN and Revival parties declared they would support it. On 22 June 2022, after a successful no-confidence motion, the then coalition government, composed of the parties "We Continue the Change", "BSP for Bulgaria" and "Democratic Bulgaria", was overthrown.

On August 1, 2022, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Rumen Radev signed Decree № 212 appointing a caretaker government on 2 August 2022 and Decree № 213 dissolving the Forty-seventh National Assembly and the scheduling of elections for a National Assembly on 2 October 2022. For caretaker Deputy Prime Minister for Public Order and Security and caretaker Minister of the Interior was appointed Ivan Demerdzhiev.

Early parliamentary elections were held on 2 October 2022 and the newly elected 48th National Assembly began work on 19 October. Deputies of the 48th National Assembly adopted a decision to send military and military-technical support to Ukraine. On 23 December 2022, the Law on Ratification of the Agreement between the Ministries of Defence of Bulgaria and Ukraine on the Free Provision of Armaments, Equipment and Ammunition was promulgated in the State Gazette. At the end of the year, the

caretaker cabinet approved additional funding for measures to assist Ukrainian refugees.

On 10 November 2022, the National Assembly held a hearing of the Interim Deputy Prime Minister for Public Order and Security and Minister of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev on the basis of Article 110 of the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly on the measures taken to secure the country's border and deal with the flow of illegal immigrants. At the beginning of the hearing, Minister Demerdzhiev told the deputies that with his taking office an analysis of the necessary measures that need to be taken at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey was made in a very quick order. Ivan Demerdzhiev highlighted as a major problem the reduced staff of the Border Police in recent years, which led to overtime work by other structures of the Ministry of Interior and to the inclusion of the military in the protection of the Bulgarian border. In this context, actions have been taken, including a proposal to increase the staff of the Border Police by 1260 officers. The caretaker Minister of Interior also pointed out as challenges the lack of vehicles to serve the territory in the 30-kilometre zone and the entire area of responsibility, the poor condition of the roads serving the 30-kilometre border area, and the lack of technical support. According to the Minister, the necessary action has been taken by the Ministry of Interior on all three issues.

Regarding Bulgaria's interaction with Frontex, Ivan Demerdzhiev pointed out that the interaction with the agency has been improved and deepened immensely. Interaction with Europol has also been improved and increased. The Director of Europol has visited Bulgaria in 2022 on two lines – on the exchange of information, which is of great importance in dismantling international networks and channels for illegal migration, and on the transfer of experience of Bulgarian staff, which also happens on the ground at the border.

From the rostrum of the National Assembly, the Minister also stressed the serious need for legislative amendments regarding the fight against illegal trafficking, since, according to him, illegal trafficking is considered in Bulgaria as a rather lightly punishable crime and Bulgaria suffers from the lack of sufficiently clear provisions that criminalise some of the acts related to human trafficking.

In a Communication<sup>1</sup> from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council entitled "Making Schengen stronger with the full participation of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia in the area without internal border controls" of 16 November 2022, the Commission calls on the Council to take the necessary decisions without further delay to allow Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia to fully participate in the Schengen area.

On 17 November 2022, the Parliament of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted a declaration<sup>2</sup> on Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen area. In the declaration, the 48th National Assembly declared its full support for the efforts of the Bulgarian government to achieve a decision of the EU Council on Bulgaria's Schengen membership by the end of 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> COM/2022/636 final <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0636&qid=1669020880751>

<sup>2</sup> Declaration on the accession of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Schengen area <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp;jsessionid=6256D6343BB0D0131A21BB A40F73E1B8?idMat=180363>

In a decision on 8 December 2022, the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council rejected the proposal for Bulgaria and Romania to join Schengen. Austria voted against the admission of the two Balkan countries, while the Netherlands only voted against the admission of Bulgaria.

On 14 December 2022, the caretaker government decided that Bulgaria would provide new humanitarian aid to Ukraine in the amount of BGN 234,700 to help the country meet its most pressing humanitarian needs in the face of the approaching winter season and increased attacks on critical infrastructure. The funding has been provided from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Development and Humanitarian Aid budget. During the meeting, the Council of Ministers also approved BGN 97,792 in humanitarian aid for Bulgaria's participation in Team Europe's regional initiative to support Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The voluntary contribution is intended to express Bulgaria's consistent support for UNHCR's activities and programmes, as well as to be in line with the country's national foreign policy priorities, including reducing the risk of migratory pressures and combating the root causes of irregular migration, which affects the country and Europe as a whole.

## **2.2 ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL AUTHORITIES AND NATIONAL DOCUMENTS IN THE FIELD OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM**

In 2022, continued the work of the **National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration (NCMBAI)**, which is an important collective advisory body for the formulation and coordination of the implementation of public policies in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration in the Republic of Bulgaria. The importance of this Council stems from its broad structural composition at a high political level with representatives of all relevant state institutions, as well as from its specific and clearly defined functions. The body has six main functions, including the development, updating and proposal to the Council of Ministers (CoM) of strategic documents in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration, the proposal to the CoM of annual plans for the implementation of the strategic documents, as well as reports on their implementation, measures to increase the effectiveness of migration, borders, asylum and integration management. The National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration is also committed to providing guidance on the implementation of migration, borders, asylum and integration policies at national, regional and European level, to coordinating the activities of state authorities, local self-government bodies and local administrations, NGOs and international organisations in the territory of the country in defining and implementing migration, borders, asylum and integration policies and relevant strategic documents.

On 8 September 2022, a regular meeting of the National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration was held to consider issues related to: the financing of the stay and integration of Afghan nationals evacuated to the Republic of Bulgaria in 2021; the implementation of commitments made in April 2022 by the Ministry of Interior to accommodate 220 persons, family members of Ministry of Interior of Ukraine employees, in two of the departmental rest facilities. Consideration was also given to a letter received from the European Commission concerning the launch of a campaign to collect applications from Member States for the number of persons to be admitted under resettlement in 2023 with the support of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2021-2027 (AMIF), as well as a forecast for the period 2024-2025.

During the meeting, at the initiative of the permanent Strategic Working Groups (SWGs) of NCMBAI, the following strategic documents were included in the agenda for approval:

- Annual Action Plan for 2022 and Report on the extent of implementation of the objectives set, in accordance with the National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2021-2025 (DCM No. 256/25.03.2021);
- Annual Action Plan 2022 in implementation of the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management, 2020-2025 (DCM 792/20.10.2020).

At the initiative of the Integrated Border Management SWG, a National Capability Development, Border Management and Return Plan has been included in the agenda for approval.

The National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration proposed to the Council of Ministers that the competent state authorities securing the stay of the Afghan nationals admitted to the Republic of Bulgaria, in accordance with Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) No. 633/26.08.2021, update the plan developed for securing the stay of the persons and prepare a plan-account for the expenses incurred so far and those required by the end of 2022, as well as possible estimates for the following year in order to secure the stay and integration of this category of persons.

The NCMBAI proposed to the Council of Ministers the establishment of a National Operational Headquarters, with the task to plan, manage, coordinate and control at central level the actions on reception, accommodation, health, social and integration services and assistance to the persons who have sought and received temporary protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, in accordance with the updated Action Plan for Temporary Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria adopted by the Council of Ministers with Decision No 510/21.07.2022. It is also proposed that the Republic of Bulgaria participates in the pledging exercise announced by the European Commission and identifies 50 third-country nationals or stateless persons coming from a third country to which they have been displaced to be accepted for resettlement in 2023 with the support of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, meeting the criterion "Syrian refugees in the region and in particular from the Republic of Turkey".

As part of the Council's decisions, the following have been adopted: the 2022 Plan for the implementation of the priorities of the National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2021-2025; the 2022 Plan for the implementation of the objectives of the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management, 2020-2025; the National Plan for Capacity Building, Border Management and Return. A Report on the implementation of the National Strategy on Migration, 2021-2025 in the period April 2021 - June 2022 has also been approved.

On 29 September 2022, a correspondence meeting of the National Council for Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration was held, at which a Progress Report on the implementation of the strategic objectives set out in the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management, 2020-2025 (RMS 792/20.10.2020) for the period 01.01.2021 - 31.12.2022 was presented.

The National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration adopted the Progress Report on the implementation of the strategic objectives set out in the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management in the Republic of Bulgaria,

2020-2025 for the period 01.01.2021 – 31.12.2022 and proposed the Council of Ministers to approve the document.

In relation to the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 adopted in June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, in Bulgaria in 2022 the **"Action Plan for the implementation of the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria in 2022"**<sup>3</sup> was adopted by Decision No. 879 of the Council of Ministers of 09.11.2022. The plan structures the measures at national level to implement the Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 to establish the European Child Guarantee, the main objective of which is to prevent social exclusion by ensuring children in need have access to key services such as pre-school training and care in early childhood, education (including school activities), health, nutrition and housing. The document covers these main policy areas as well as the main target groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion identified in the Recommendation – homeless children or children living in extremely poor housing conditions, children with disabilities, children with mental health problems, children with a migrant background, children with a minority racial or ethnic background, children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children in insecure family environments. The document is valid until the end of 2030. The financing of the plan implementation will be supported by both the state budget and EU funds. The measures, which will be financed by the European Social Fund+ through the Human Resources Development Programme and the Education Programme for the 2021-2027 programming period, will cover over 200,000 children from vulnerable groups.

## **2.3 GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND AMENDMENTS TO THE NATIONAL LEGAL SYSTEM IN THE FIELD OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM**

The laws that establish the legal framework for the implementation of asylum and migration policy in Bulgaria are the Law on Asylum and Refugees, Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, Law on the Bulgarian citizenship, Law on Bulgarian Identity Documents, Law on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Law on Employment Promotion, Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility, Law on the Entry, Residence and Exit of Citizens of the European Union and Members of their Families from the Republic of Bulgaria, the Criminal Code (regarding penalties for illegal migration and trafficking in human beings), Law on Recognition of Professional Qualifications, as well as regulations, organisational regulations of competent institutions, as well as laws on health, education and other areas that have specific provisions for migrants.

In 2022, a set of actions have been undertaken to improve national legislation and align it with EU law.

At the initiative of the National Assembly and with the involvement of the relevant national enforcement authorities, the first steps were taken in 2022 to develop a draft law to partially transpose Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-

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<sup>3</sup> Action Plan for the implementation of the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria in 2022

<https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bq-BG&Id=1560>

country nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment and repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC. In October 2022, a group of Members of Parliament (MPs) submitted to the National Assembly a **Draft law amending and supplementing the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility**<sup>4</sup>. It imposed amendments to be introduced as well to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria and its Implementing Regulations, the Law on Bulgarian Identity Documents and the Law on Employment Promotion. The draft law was adopted at first reading on 23 December, examined at second reading in plenary on 19 January 2023 and promulgated in the State Gazette, issue 8 of 25 January 2023.

During the reporting period, a Draft Decree of the Council of Ministers on amending and supplementing the Regulation on the implementation of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria was prepared. The proposed amendments to the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, promulgated in the State Gazette No. 21 of 12 March 2021, are related to the granting of the right of permanent residence to foreigners who have made investments or increased their investments in the Republic of Bulgaria. On the basis of the proposed changes, legislative amendments to the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria entered into force by promulgation in the State Gazette (No. 36 of 13 May 2022; No. 43 of 10 June 2022).

On 3 June 2022, **amendments and supplements to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility**, aimed at facilitating the integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection into Bulgarian society and, in particular, at ensuring access to the national labour market, entered into force with the promulgation in the State Gazette No. 41.

On 04.04.2022, a **Law amending the Law on the Bulgarian citizenship** was adopted (promulgated in the State Gazette, No. 26 of 01.04.2022), which completely repealed the provisions of Articles 12a and 14a of this Act. The main motive for the amendment is the need to take action to eliminate the possibility of "investment" citizenship or the so-called "golden passports", which undermine the essence of EU citizenship, as well as the implementation of greater control in obtaining Bulgarian citizenship.

In 2022, the **Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR)** was amended in Article 39 in order to clearly define the rights of beneficiaries of temporary protection. The Bill amending the Law on Health Insurance explicitly states that persons granted temporary protection status must be insured with the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). As a result of the legal changes, optimal treatment options are created for persons currently arriving from Ukraine due to the military conflict in that country, similarly to refugees and Bulgarian citizens. The changes are in line with the principle of non-discrimination of different categories of persons in need of protection.

On 29 September 2022, the National Programme for the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Human Beings and the Protection of Victims for 2022 was adopted at a regular meeting of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human

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<sup>4</sup> Draft law amending and supplementing the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility, National Assembly  
<https://parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/164337>

Beings (NCTCH). The programme provides for a comprehensive approach in the management of anti-trafficking policies. One of the key objectives is to raise awareness and sensitise the public and at-risk groups on trafficking in human beings.

The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted Decree No. 771 of 12 October 2022 introducing a visa requirement for holders of Russian service passports.

By Decision No 144 adopted on 10 March 2022, the Bulgarian Government adopted and activated at national level Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 and Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022, establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine and providing for their temporary protection. Decision No 144 of the Council of Ministers of 2022 amends the National Action Plan for Temporary Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria adopted by Decision No 506 of the Council of Ministers of 2011.

In the days and months following the adoption of Decision No. 144, changes were made to the Bulgarian legislation in force. Between March and August, 14 decisions of the Council of Ministers were adopted aimed at taking coordination and organisational measures aimed at regulating the rights of beneficiaries of temporary protection, defining the responsibilities of national authorities, setting accommodation conditions, integration measures, etc. In the course of drafting and implementing a strategy to provide support to Ukrainian refugees, the NGO sector has played a key role and has been actively involved in the development of forthcoming legislative changes, in particular to the Law on Asylum and Refugees.



# 3. RESPONSES TO THE INFLUX OF PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

## 3.1 TEMPORARY PROTECTION OF PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

### 3.1.1. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 4 MARCH 2022 IN RELATION TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION (EU) 2022/382 OUTLINING WHO SHALL AND MAY BE ENTITLED TO TEMPORARY PROTECTION

Following the adoption of Decision No. 144, the regular government took measures to ensure access to the territory of Bulgaria for a total of 149,359 Ukrainian refugees. For 2022, of these, 22,057 were men, 74,348 women, 52,274 accompanied minors and 589 unaccompanied minors. A total of 976,776 Ukrainian citizens have passed through the country, and as of December 2022, 50,262 Ukrainian citizens live in the country.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1.2. LEGAL OR POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 4 MARCH 2022 IN RELATION TO THE REGISTRATION OF PERSONS ARRIVING FROM UKRAINE

In 2022, the Law on Asylum and Refugee (LAR) was amended in Article 39, aimed at defining the rights of beneficiaries of temporary protection. The law stipulates that persons granted temporary protection status are compulsorily insured with the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF).

According to the amendments to Article 39, foreigners who have been granted temporary protection are entitled:

- to remain on the territory of Bulgaria;
- to be reunited with members of their family (Art. 39a of LAR);
- to work without needing a permit;
- to receive appropriate accommodation or means of accommodation if necessary;
- to receive social assistance
- to avail of health insurance, accessible medical care and medical services under the conditions and according to the procedure for Bulgarian citizens
- to return freely to their country of origin.

**By Decision No 145 of 10.03.2022**, the Council of Ministers decided to approve the Programme for provision of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as a result of the hostilities in Ukraine on the

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<sup>5</sup> Data of the Ministry of Interior which are cited in SAR's report for 2022.

basis of Article 2(2) of the Law on Asylum and Refugees in relation to Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection to Ukrainian nationals who have been resettled on or after 24 February 2022.

**Decision No. 147 of 12.03.2022** of the Council of Ministers provides Instructions for the procedure for reporting and payment of the humanitarian aid provided under the Programme for support to accommodation facilities registered at the National Tourist Register and providing accommodation and feeding services to persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. The Ministry of Tourism administers the programme for provision of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. In case of availability of places, the higher education institutions, "Studentski stolove i obshtezhtiya" EAD, schools are entitled to accommodate persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria under the Law on Asylum and Refugees without payment of rent in the student hostels.

**Decision No. 181 of 30.03.2022 revokes** Decision No. 147 of the Council of Ministers of 2022 on the approval of the instructions for the procedure for accounting and payment of the humanitarian aid provided under the Programme for support to accommodation facilities entered in the National Tourist Register and providing accommodation and feeding services to persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as a result of the military actions in Ukraine.

**Decision No. 241 of 15 April 2022** extends the scope of the Programme for the benefit of humanitarian assistance to persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria and to Bulgarian citizens who have been granted permanent residence in Ukraine and who were permanently established and residing on the territory of Ukraine before 24 February 2022 and do not have any residential property on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

**Decision No. 298 of 09.05.2022** amends the daily financial assistance in the form of accommodation and meals, tourist tax and transportation in the amount of BGN 40 without VAT.

**Decision No. 318 of 20.05.2022** establishes that the state recreation and preventive and rehabilitation bases of the state administration and budget dependent organisations shall accommodate persons granted temporary protection.

**Decision No. 370 of 02.06.2022** amends and supplements the National Action Plan for Temporary Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. It is allowed to provide food and refreshments under contracts concluded by the administration of the Council of Ministers, with the methodological assistance of the State Agency for Refugees.

The Bulgarian government adopted additional integration incentives for Ukrainians working in the country. As of 6 June 2022, they were entitled to additional 3 months of financial assistance of 365 BGN per month for rent and overheads (electricity, heating, water, internet).

By several decisions, the Council of Ministers allocated financial support for the Temporary Protection Plan, which has been implemented within the approved funds of the budgets for the relevant year by the state bodies and institutions:

**Decision No. 285 of 05.05.2022** approves assistance to applicants under the programme for the use of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria, services providing shelter to persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria in the amount of BGN 4,500,480.

**Decision No 334 of 27.05.2022** approves assistance to applicants under the programme for the use of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria, services providing shelter to persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria in the amount of BGN 54 267 360, 40.

**By Decision No 423 of 29.06. 2022.** The Council of Ministers approves assistance to applicants under the programme for the use of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria, objects providing shelter services and are entered in the register of shelter for persons seeking temporary protection in Bulgaria in the amount of BGN 6,817,517.

**By Decision No. 502 of 21.07.2022,** the Council of Ministers approved the provision of assistance under the Programme for the use of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as a result of the military operations in Ukraine in the amount of financial resources as follows: for the month of March - BGN 1,099,715; for the month of April - BGN 3,242,030; for the month of May - BGN 75,392,348.

**By Decision No 602 of 17.05.2005** the Council of Ministers additionally approved the provision of assistance under the Programme for the use of humanitarian assistance for persons seeking temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria in the amount of financial resources as follows: for the month of March - BGN 326,143; for the month of April - BGN 1,247,992; for the month of May - BGN 3,436,528.

**Decision No 510 of 21.07.2022** allowed the Council of Ministers to adopt an updated Action Plan for Temporary Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. The Plan defines the criteria for the existence of a temporary protection crisis: more than 500 foreigners seeking temporary protection crossing the state border within 24 hours. The plan identifies risk areas and assigns responsibilities to state institutions, departments, regional and municipal administrations, state agencies and the Bulgarian Red Cross.

**By Decision No 518 of 22.07.2022** the Council of Ministers decided to grant minimum aid to companies that have carried out activities for the preparation and delivery of prepared food for persons fleeing from the war in Ukraine who have been granted temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria in the period 11 June - 5 July 2022. The maximum amount of the granted minimum aid was up to BGN 770,000 for the reimbursement of expenses incurred by companies.

### **3.1.3. LEGAL OR POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 4 MARCH 2022 IN RELATION TO THE PROVISION OF RESIDENCE PERMITS OR OTHER DOCUMENTS GRANTING THE RIGHT TO RESIDE TO BENEFICIARIES OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION**

According to a visa-free travel agreement with Ukraine of 2017, all Ukrainian citizens can enter Bulgaria with a valid passport for a period of 90 days within 6 months without needing any permission from the authorities.

Since 24 February, a special Automated Information System (AIS), "Temporary Protection" has been set up in Bulgaria to facilitate registration. On 15 March, the Bulgarian government opened new registration points where refugees from Ukraine can register and obtain a document certifying that they benefit from temporary protection in Bulgaria for a period of 1 year. After registration and obtaining a card as a person under temporary protection, refugees from Ukraine may apply for social assistance, which may be in the form of periodic monthly assistance as well as in the form of one-off financial assistance in the maximum amount of BGN 375 in order to meet the occasional health, educational, household and other vital needs of the persons and families. The amount of the benefit is determined according to the individual's financial and family situation.

### **3.1.4. LEGAL OR POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 4 MARCH 2022 IN RELATION TO ENSURING ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET FOR BENEFICIARIES OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION**

In 2022, the following **amendments and supplements to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility** (promulgated in State Gazette No. 41) in relation to ensuring free access to the Bulgarian labour market without a special permit for third-country nationals with temporary protection have been adopted:

2. In Article 9:

(a) a new paragraph 5 shall be inserted: "(5) A permit for access to the labour market shall not be required for third-country national workers who are beneficiaries of temporary protection for the period of temporary protection determined by an act of the Council of Ministers."

Following amendments to the Law on Employment Promotion (amended and supplemented by State Gazette No. 41 of 3 June 2022), Ukrainian citizens have acquired the right to register with labour offices and enjoy the rights of jobseekers in the provision of employment services.

Registration forms have been prepared for Ukrainian citizens, including in Ukrainian and English.

### **3.1.5. LEGAL OR POLICY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 4 MARCH 2022 IN RELATION TO ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES FOR BENEFICIARIES OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION**

With regard to the organisation and management of the accommodation and integration of Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria who have been granted temporary

protection, a Programme for Humanitarian Assistance to Displaced Persons from Ukraine Granted Temporary Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria was adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria No. 17 of 20.05.2022. Its initial validity was until 31.10.2022. The Council of Ministers extended until 24.02.2023 the validity of the Programme. During the extended period of validity, new accommodation was carried out only in state and municipal facilities.

A Temporary Task Force was established under the **National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration** by Order of the Prime Minister No. P-213/03.10.2022. The Task Force was composed of representatives of all responsible ministries and agencies. One of its main tasks was to organise and manage the process of accommodation and integration of Ukrainian citizens.

Taking into account the fact that the problems of the Ukrainian citizens seeking protection in Bulgaria were the main focus and commitment of the Council of Ministers, a **National Operational Headquarters (NOH)**, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister for Public Order and Security and the Minister of the Interior, was established on 18 November 2022 by Order No P-240 of the Prime Minister. The main task of the NOH was to plan, manage, coordinate and control the reception, accommodation, health, social and integration services and assistance to persons who have sought and received temporary protection in Bulgaria. The following operational working groups were established within the NOH: Vulnerability Assessment and Determination of the Need for Accommodation of Ukrainian Citizens with Temporary Protection Group; Social Affairs, Employment and Integration Group; Coordination Group with NGOs, UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF and the Bulgarian Red Cross.

A dedicated **government website** - <https://ukraine.gov.bg> - was also developed to provide up-to-date information in Bulgarian, Ukrainian and English, targeting persons enjoying temporary protection in Bulgaria. The website is a single information portal with comprehensive information for persons arriving from Ukraine. A dedicated section of the portal provides information on the procedure for obtaining international protection status. The platform allows users to submit alerts for assistance and evacuation of citizens. The portal also processes information about volunteers and donors. A special section with the measures related to Covid-19 restrictions has been created. The Portal also has its own news section.

With regard to access to healthcare, an amendment to the Law on Asylum and Refugees was necessary, since according to Article 39 of the Law, as of the date the decision of the Council of Ministers to grant temporary protection was adopted, beneficiaries of protection had been only entitled to emergency medical care. With the **amendment of the Law on Asylum and Refugees** entered into force on 26 April 2022, beneficiaries of temporary protection are entitled to health insurance, accessible medical care and medical services under the conditions applicable to Bulgarian citizens. Even before these amendments came into force, state and municipal hospitals, diagnostics and consulting centres / medical centres and general practitioners and specialists began providing free check-ups and care to Ukrainian citizens in need.

Persons enjoying temporary protection were provided with a one-time assistance under Article 16 of the Regulations on the Implementation of the Law on Social Assistance in the amount of up to five times the guaranteed minimum income, i.e. up to BGN 375.

For the period from 24.02.2022 to 31.12.2022 in the territorial divisions of the Social Assistance Agency – the Social Assistance Directorates throughout the country have been submitted a total of 50,144 applications for granting one-time assistance to persons with temporary protection displaced from Ukraine. A total of 49,386 one-off benefits were distributed to 85,514 persons.

From 29 September 2022, the Social Assistance Agency is being implementing **Project BG05FMOP001-6.001 "Provision of vouchers for food and basic necessities for displaced persons from Ukraine"**. The project is funded by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived under the Food and/or basic Material Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, as a result of the European Commission's initiative to address the consequences of the crisis through the REACT-EU mechanism. Within the framework of the project, vouchers for food and basic necessities with a nominal value of BGN 100 have been provided to persons displaced from Ukraine after 24.02.2022, who benefit from temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. In the implementation of the project activities, from the beginning of November 2022 until 31.01.2023, the Social Assistance Directorates provided vouchers to each person with temporary protection within 3 days from the submission of an application form, the validity period for their use in the shop network in the country being 2 months from the date of issue. As of 4 January 2023, 32,478 persons wishing to benefit from this activity have submitted their questionnaires. A total of 30,711 vouchers have been distributed, 10,326 have been used and 44,982 accompanying measures have been provided. Accompanying measures included advice on labour market inclusion, childcare and placement in childcare and schools, provision of information materials, referral to specialised counselling, etc. The specific objectives of the project were related to the direct support to the displaced persons from Ukraine, who have been granted temporary protection, through basic support for the provision of food and necessities through the provision of vouchers under the programme, complemented with accompanying measures for further integration according to the needs identified by the DSA staff.

The provision of basic and accompanying measures consisted of conducting individual and/or group counselling of the displaced persons, providing information on the possibilities for support according to the needs identified by the questionnaire, including: provision of social benefits and services; specific support for people with disabilities and children, including unaccompanied children; legal assistance if necessary; assistance for inclusion in the labour market and other forms of social integration; consultation with social workers – psychologists, lawyers, educators, etc. Accompanying measures, complementing the provision of vouchers for food and necessities, have been implemented by the staff of the Social Assistance Directorates, with full respect for the dignity of the persons of the target group and with emphasis on their subsequent integration.

### **3.2. MEASURES TAKEN OUTSIDE OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE TEMPORARY PROTECTION DIRECTIVE.**

As part of the measures taken outside the legal framework of Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001, education and socialisation regulations, including the provision of psychological support, have been intensively applied. Measures have been taken to improve the integration of persons from Ukraine and no legislative measures

have been implemented. Initial registration points have been established for persons arriving from Ukraine present at the border and in the country. Immediately after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, **timely up-to-date information in Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Russian and English was published on the website of the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior**. The information was addressed to all citizens arriving from the territory of Ukraine and included a detailed description of the possibilities for legal residence in the Republic of Bulgaria under the visa-free regime. The possibilities for assistance in accommodation of citizens arriving from Ukraine in case they need such accommodation were also presented in detail.

Information was published in the above-mentioned 4 languages on the possibility for Ukrainian citizens legally residing in the country to extend the period of residence for humanitarian reasons, in accordance with the provision of Article 27 of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria. This information was relevant for Ukrainian citizens arriving in the country under the visa-free regime. The template application to be submitted in this case to the authorities for administrative control of residence of foreigners was also published. Information aimed at Bulgarian legal and natural persons providing shelter to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine has also been published.

## 4. LEGAL MIGRATION

### 4.1 LABOUR MIGRATION - STATISTICS AND TRENDS

As in the previous year 2021, the policy of balanced admission of third-country nationals (TCNs) for employment purposes continued in 2022. This policy is aimed at increasing employment and is implemented taking into account the needs of the national labour market, the current political situation and the provisions of the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility.

In 2022, **8,922 workers – nationals of 76 third countries – were allowed to enter the Bulgarian labour market**, which is about 4,907 more than in 2021 (4,015)<sup>6</sup>. The largest number of decisions/positive opinions has been granted for the exercise of employment through the "Single Residence and Work Permit" (SRWP), the number of which has progressively increased since 2019. Their number in 2021 was 1,833 and in 2022 they were already 4,549, representing 51% of all permits issued during this period.

Permits for **seasonal employment of up to 9 months for foreigners** – "Seasonal Worker Permit" (SWP) were granted to **1,770 workers**. There was a significant increase in these compared to previous years. The lifting of the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic can be cited as one of the reasons for the increase in 2022. In this case, there were mainly workers in agriculture and tourism where low-skilled labour is practised. With regard to the third group of work permits (WPs), which includes family members authorised to stay in the country for extended periods and seconded professionals in companies performing service contracts in the country, an increase in the number of permits issued in recent years has also been recorded. Their number in 2022 was 1,103, while in 2021 it was 819 and in 2019 it was 469.

In 2022, **1,371 third-country nationals** were granted **permission to access the labour market through the so-called EU Blue Card**. In the past year 2021, the number of persons was 381 EU Blue Card holders were highly qualified professionals, the majority of whom were employed in the Intra-Corporate Transfer (ICT) sector (Creation and dissemination of information and creative products; telecommunications). Others were employed in the trade; automotive and motorcycle repair, construction and manufacturing sectors. Persons from the Russian Federation (794), the Republic of Belarus (144), the Republic of Turkey (73), the Republic of Cuba (72), Ukraine (48), the Republic of India (53) predominated, holding mainly engineering and managerial positions. In 2022, there was an increase in the number of highly skilled professionals gaining access to the labour market due to military conflict. As of February 2022, processes were in place to start moving staff as well as entire activities and companies from Russia to EU countries, including the Republic of Bulgaria.

The number of persons authorised to access the Bulgarian labour market under the so-called **Intra-Corporate Transfer (ICT)** in 2022 was **124**.

In 2022, there was a general trend towards an increase in the number of applications submitted by employers and positive opinions/permits granted by the Employment

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<sup>6</sup> Employment Agency 2022 Action Plan Report <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/otchet-za-deinostta-na-az/>

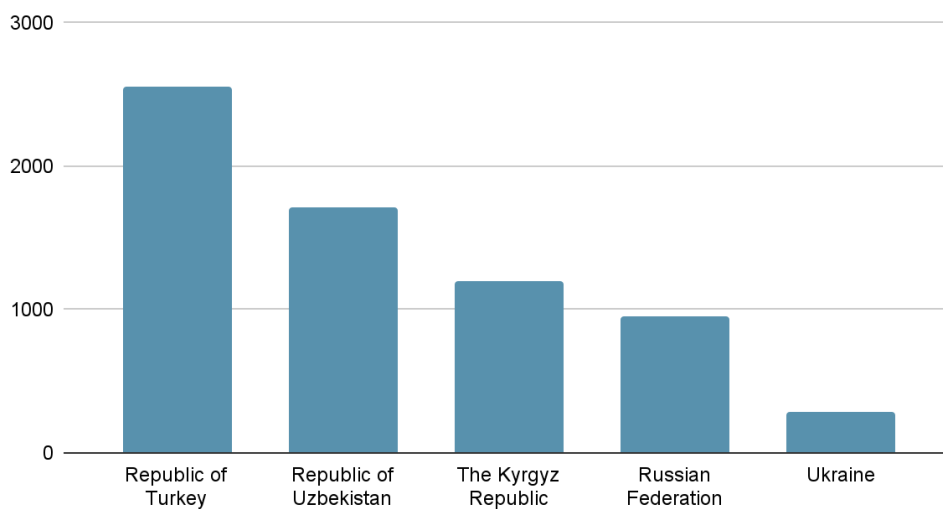


Agency to foreigners to access the Bulgarian labour market compared to 2021 and 2020. Important for this trend were the amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria (LFRB) and the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility (LLMLM), which entered into force on 01.06.2021. They regulate a single application procedure for the 4 procedures – Single Residence and Work Permit (SRWP), EU Blue Card (EUBC), Seasonal Worker Permit (SWP) and Intra-corporate transfer (ICT), while the conditions for access to the labour market for third-country national workers were eased.

In 2022, by Order No. MEU-4416/03.06.2022 of the Minister of e-Government, a working group was established to streamline the procedures for issuing work permits, including the EU Blue Card, in order to digitalise the processes of providing administrative services. Within the framework of the working group, a proposal has been drawn up to launch a project for the establishment of a Single Document Management Platform (working title) for all stakeholders, through which the documents required by third-country nationals and their employers in connection with obtaining work permits for foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria can be submitted and received. The project to build the platform is expected to start in 2023.

During the reporting period, **the highest number of decisions/positive opinions on labour market access** were granted for citizens of the Republic of Turkey and their number is – **2,556**. They were mainly for seconded professionals, engineering and technical staff, mid-technical staff, mainly in construction, and seasonal workers. Next were the citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan, whose number was 1,711, including seasonal workers, construction workers, and workers in the manufacturing industry. The number of citizens from the Kyrgyz Republic working as seasonal workers and workers in the manufacturing industry was 1202. From the Russian Federation, 950 citizens working as highly skilled specialists, medium-technical personnel, engineering and technical personnel, etc. were registered, and from Ukraine, the number was 290, mainly seasonal workers, engineering and technical personnel, and construction workers.

## Positive opinions about access to the labor market in 2022



In 2022, **204 opinions were issued to refuse third-country nationals access to the labour market**, with an increasing trend. This was mainly due to the increase in the number of applications for employment of foreign nationals who do not meet the requirements in the regulations on employment of foreign nationals.

**Five decisions were taken in relation to the granting of permits for freelance activities by foreigners** during the reporting period. The foreigners were citizens of Ukraine (3); the Republic of Serbia (1) and the Russian Federation (1).

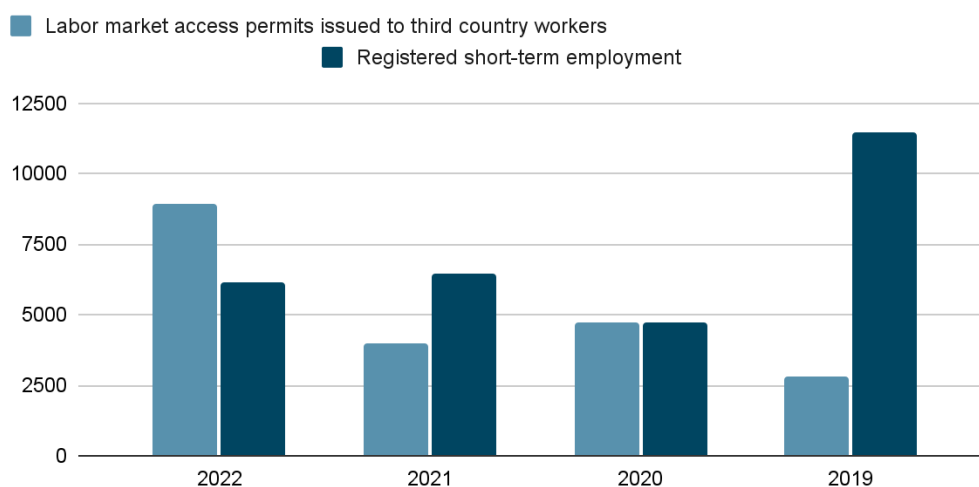
In 2022, **short-term employment of 6,150 foreigners from third countries** was registered, which is about 5% less than the number of registered short-term employment in 2021 (6,471). Of these, 2,046 were foreigners on secondment for up to 90 days under service contracts in the territory of Bulgaria. The foreigners were citizens of the Republic of Turkey - 1,818; Tunisia - 102; Ukraine - 77; the Republic of Uzbekistan - 19; Bosnia and Herzegovina - 14 and others.

The number of declarations submitted by employers and the number of registrations carried out by the Employment Agency on the employment of persons of Bulgarian origin was 202, as they were mostly citizens of the Republic of Moldova (106); Ukraine (82); the Republic of Serbia (6); the Russian Federation (7) and the Republic of North Macedonia - 1.

In terms of **seasonal employment for up to 90 days, 3,902 foreign nationals** from 21 third countries were registered during the year, according to 994 employers' declarations. Most of them were citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic - 1,105, the Republic of Turkey - 597; the Republic of Moldova - 579; Ukraine - 526; the Republic of Uzbekistan - 346, etc. Due to the changes in the geopolitical situation and expected significant changes in the labour market related to the growing number of Ukrainian refugees, the number of foreigners from Ukraine registering for seasonal employment has decreased. Most of them were beneficiaries of a temporary protection status on

the basis of Art. 1a para. 3 of the LAR, through which they acquire the right to work, including as seasonal workers, without a permit to access the labour market.

### Labor market access permits issued to workers - third-country nationals and Registered short-term employment



## 4.2 NEW INTERGOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENTS CONCLUDED TO REGULATE LABOUR MIGRATION

In connection with the **Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Government of the Republic of Moldova** on the regulation of labour migration (signed on 18.06.2018 in Sofia, promulgated in SG No. 82 of 5.10.2018), 69 offers from Bulgarian employers for the recruitment of Moldovan workers for 486 advertised vacancies have been accepted, processed and sent to the National Employment Service of the Republic of Moldova (ANOFM) in 2022. 71 applications of migrant workers have been processed. The employment contracts of 9 persons have been extended and 8 Moldovan citizens have had their employment terminated. During the reporting period, 48 Moldovan workers started working in Bulgaria.

As regards the preparations for the launch of the activities under the **Agreement between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Armenia** (signed on 12.02.2018, promulgated in State Gazette No. 90 of 30.10.2018), during the reporting period the activity of the State Employment Agency under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (competent authority for the implementation of the Agreement) was terminated and a new structure "Joint Social Service" was formed, which took over the functions and powers of the previous institution. During the reporting period, the Armenian side did not contact the Bulgarian Employment Agency regarding the resumption of preparatory activities for the launch of the implementation of the Agreement.

In order to start the activities under the **Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Government of the Georgia on the**

**Regulation of Labour Migration** (promulgated in SG No.93 of 26.11.2019), the Bulgarian side has sent to Georgia a proposal to adopt the composition of the Joint Selection Commission, which shall be determined by a joint act of the heads of the competent institutions. In 2022, no response was received from the Georgian side regarding the proposal of the Employment Agency to start the implementation of the Agreement.

In connection with the interest expressed by the Republic of Albania and Turkmenistan, a conciliation procedure under Article 32 of the Organisational Rules of the Council of Ministers and its Administration (ORCMIA) was carried out, and by a protocol decision of the Council of Ministers, in accordance with Protocol No. 8/27.02.2020, the **draft Agreement on regulating labour migration between the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Government of the Republic of Albania and the draft Agreement on regulating labour migration between the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Government of Turkmenistan** were approved as a basis for negotiations. By orders of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, the Bulgarian delegation was appointed to conduct negotiations on the conclusion of these agreements. During the reporting period, no negotiations were held on the conclusion of the agreements on the regulation of labour migration with the Republic of Albania, Turkmenistan and other third countries.

#### **4.3 LEGISLATIVE CHANGES**

As in the previous year 2021, legislative amendments came into force in 2022 with the promulgation in the State Gazette, which introduced procedures to harmonise national legislation on legal migration more effectively with EU law. The main amendments were to the **Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria (LFRB)** determining the conditions and procedures under which foreigners may enter, reside and leave the Republic of Bulgaria, to the **Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria** and to the **Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility**, which regulates access to the labour market for third-country national workers, including freelance activities.

In 2022, on the initiative of the National Assembly and with the participation of the national law enforcement authorities involved, the first steps were taken to develop a draft law for the partial transposition of Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment and repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC. Within the framework of the **draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria**, amendments were envisaged to introduce the possibility of obtaining a residence and work permit for a period of 5 years for the purpose of highly qualified employment. According to this Bill beneficiaries of international protection should also be able to obtain a residence and work permit for the purpose of highly qualified employment. During the reporting period, it was also proposed to shorten the decision period for issuing an EU Blue Card in order to attract workers from third countries. It was envisaged to ease the procedure for changing the employer. The proposed amendment to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria enables EU Blue Card holders to work remotely on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

In 2022, a **Draft Decree of the Council of Ministers was prepared to amend and supplement the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria.** These proposed amendments stem from the amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, promulgated in the State Gazette No. 21 of 12 March 2021 and related to the granting of the right of permanent residence to foreigners who have made investments or increased their investments in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The partial preliminary impact assessment showed that the following issue has been identified, which was the basis of the proposed amendment: "Lack of a regulatory framework for granting the right of permanent residence on the basis of investments made in the Republic of Bulgaria". According to the description of this issue, it was not possible to solve the problem within the existing legislation by changing the organisation of work and/or by introducing new technological opportunities, as there will continue to be a discrepancy with the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria which details the grounds for granting the right of permanent residence through investment.

In the partial preliminary impact assessment the following objectives have been set for the draft law: Objective 1 "Achieving synchronization of the regulatory framework related to granting the right of permanent residence to foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria on the basis of investments"; Objective 2 "Creation of the necessary legal basis for the implementation of the functions assigned to the Ministry of Innovation and Growth and the Bulgarian Investment Agency in the procedure for granting the right of permanent residence."; Objective 3 "Increasing foreign investments in the Republic of Bulgaria, optimising control and creating sustainable guarantees for the presence and effect of the investments made"; Objective 4 "Guarantee the security of the country by exercising prior control in relation to the persons who apply to obtain the right of permanent residence through investments and the origin of the funds that will be invested".

On 3 June 2022, the following **amendments and supplements to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility**, aimed at facilitating the integration processes of beneficiaries of temporary protection into Bulgarian society and, in particular, at guaranteeing access to the national labour market, have entered into force with the promulgation in issue 41 of the State Gazette.

2. In Art. 9:

a) a new paragraph shall be created. 5: "(5) A permit for access to the labour market shall not be required for workers – third-country nationals benefiting from temporary protection, for the period of the temporary protection determined by an act of the Council of Ministers."

The **Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility** has also been amended in Article 7. The amendments regulate the rules for access to the labour market for third-country national workers, allowing them to take up positions for which Bulgarian citizenship is not required if the third-country national has the specialised knowledge, skills and professional experience required for the position. Workers – third-country nationals with authorised access to the labour market may work under an employment relationship or as posted or dispatched in the framework of the provision of services on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria – only for the local employer or the local person who has recruited the posted or dispatched employees and for the

place, position and period of work specified in the permit issued by the competent authorities.

A package of amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria has been published on the Strategy.bg website (Council of Ministers public consultation portal) for public consultation in May-June 2022. The analysis of the bills submitted to the National Assembly in the period until the end of 2022 shows that this package has not been submitted to the Parliament.

At the same time, on 19 October 2022, a **Draft Law on Amendments and Additions to the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility**<sup>7</sup> was submitted to the National Assembly. An additional provision in this Draft Law includes amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria and its Implementing Regulations, the Law on Bulgarian Identity Documents and the Law on Employment Promotion. The draft law, adopted at first reading on 23 December, selectively transposes individual provisions of Directive 2021/1883/EU on the conditions and procedure for entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment. The draft law was to be considered at second reading in plenary in 2023.

In the grounds for the adoption of this Draft law, it is stated that this law and the consequent amendments provide for the updating of the Bulgarian legislation in order to respond to the dynamic migration processes as well as to the changes on the labour market caused by the new situation.

The aim of the Draft Law is to create a clear and transparent admissions system that will ensure a more effective attraction of talents and thus overcoming the demographic challenges Bulgaria is facing. The Blue Card should become the main instrument for attracting highly skilled workers, including faster procedures, more flexible and inclusive admission criteria and broader rights, including facilitated short- and long-term mobility.

The amendment of the regulatory framework will introduce into national legislation a lasting strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of the Bulgarian economy based on foreign knowledge and innovation. The adoption of the new provisions provides an opportunity to reduce the administrative burden on public authorities, businesses and citizens (including foreigners) and to better match supply and demand.

The reforms to the Blue Card application process envisaged by the draft law will ultimately create new opportunities for economic growth as a result of the availability of more highly skilled and permanently settled foreigners in Bulgaria, who will help combat the lack of staff in all economic sectors and the persistent demographic crisis that is growing every year.

The amendments to the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria are aimed at creating a flexible and demand-responsive, comprehensible and accessible system for the application and admission of highly qualified professionals based on objective criteria.

The implementation of the main objective of the amendment is namely to turn the Blue Card into an effective and flexible tool for attracting highly qualified personnel

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<sup>7</sup> Draft law amending and supplementing the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility, National Assembly <https://parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/164337>

from third countries and thus allow the Republic of Bulgaria to participate in the global race to attract talents.

#### **4.4 INFORMATION ON THE MODALITIES AND CONDITIONS FOR LEGAL MIGRATION**

In 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) mission in Bulgaria was implementing a project on **"Raising awareness on labour migration in Bulgaria"**. The project, carried out in coordination and operational cooperation with IOM missions in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, aimed to provide support to potential labour migrants from these countries to facilitate their decision-making process for relocation to Bulgaria by providing them with comprehensive information on living and working conditions in Bulgaria. The project thus enables persons to make an informed decision when considering moving to Bulgaria and reduces the risk of being trafficked/abused or having their rights violated. The project is funded by the National Programme of Bulgaria under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014-2020 with the financial support of the European Union and the budget of the Republic of Bulgaria.

During the reporting year, an online campaign was carried out within the project to provide information among potential labour migrants in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. The information was disseminated through relevant channels at local level, with the aim of reaching a maximum number of interested persons. Information sessions were held in these three countries, led by experts in the field of labour relations and labour market regulation in Bulgaria. In early December 2022, a total of 4 information sessions on the project were held in Tbilisi, Georgia, and Yerevan, Armenia. The information sessions provided up-to-date and detailed information on living and working conditions in Bulgaria, as well as a detailed analysis of the bilateral agreements concluded between Bulgaria and Armenia and Georgia respectively.

The implementation of the activity "organisation of information meetings" started in May 2022 in Chisinau, Moldova. As a result of temporary air transport restrictions in Moldova, the event was held in a hybrid format. 40 representatives of the regional and central offices of the National Labour Agency, which are directly involved in the processing of applications of Moldovan citizens wishing to benefit from the bilateral agreement with Bulgaria, participated. Information was provided on the state of the labour market as well as detailed information on living conditions in Bulgaria.

In 2022, an activity was carried out to inform the citizens of Armenia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, by publishing information on the internet, about the opportunities for legal stay and work in Bulgaria. A total of 6,000 citizens of these three countries received up-to-date and relevant information through the IOM online publications.

In Armenia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, information brochures were prepared and disseminated containing data on the bilateral agreements in force and general guidelines for legal stay and work in Bulgaria.

The main objective of these activities was to counteract the false and unclear information published on the internet about living and working conditions in Bulgaria, which creates conditions and potential danger of being caught up in a situation of trafficking for labour exploitation, by providing an official channel of communication with potential labour migrants.

## 5. INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

### 5.1 CHANGES IN LEGISLATION AND POLICY RELATED TO INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION.

No new comprehensive legal or policy changes in relation to international protection and access to the asylum procedure were carried out in 2022. However, amendments have been introduced to the Law on Asylum and Refugees, in particular to Article 39, in order to clearly define the rights of beneficiaries of temporary protection. The Bill amending the Law on Health Insurance explicitly states that persons granted temporary protection status are compulsorily insured with the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). The amendment provided health insurance rights for persons with temporary protection and stated the obligation of the state to pay contributions from the state budget as well as the obligation to provide health insurance as of the date of granting temporary protection.

### 5.2. SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN APPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION IN BULGARIA IN 2022

In 2022, Bulgarian policy on international protection and asylum has been conducted in the context of increased migratory flows to the country and Europe as a whole. According to Frontex, in 2022 there was a 108% increase compared to 2021 of people entering into Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean route. In 2022, 145,600 illegal border crossings were recorded along the route through the Western Balkans, which marked an increase by 136% compared to 2021. This is the highest number of crossings reported on this route since 2015. As an external EU border, Bulgaria is located on both routes.<sup>8</sup> According to the data of the State Agency for Refugees for the whole year 2022, 20,407 third-country nationals or stateless persons have applied for international protection in Bulgaria. This number represents a twofold increase in applications compared to 2021. In a slightly broader timeframe compared to the last five years, the trend of a definite increase in the number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria was even more explicit in 2022 – an increase of 86% compared to 2021.

According to State Agency for Refugees data, the number of registered applications for international protection was the highest for the period of the agency's existence. For comparison, in 2015, at the peak of the migrant crisis, the number of persons seeking international protection reached 20,391.

The situation in terms of the number of applications submitted by asylum seekers remained relatively unchanged throughout all months of the past year. In the first 6 months, 8,840 applications were submitted. The second half of the year saw a larger increase in applications for international protection – 11,567. By the end of 2022, a total of 2,412 foreigners were accommodated in refugee centres. 64% of the total

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<sup>8</sup> EU's external borders in 2022: Number of irregular border crossings highest since 2016  
<https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-s-external-borders-in-2022-number-of-irregular-border-crossings-highest-since-2016-YsAZ29>

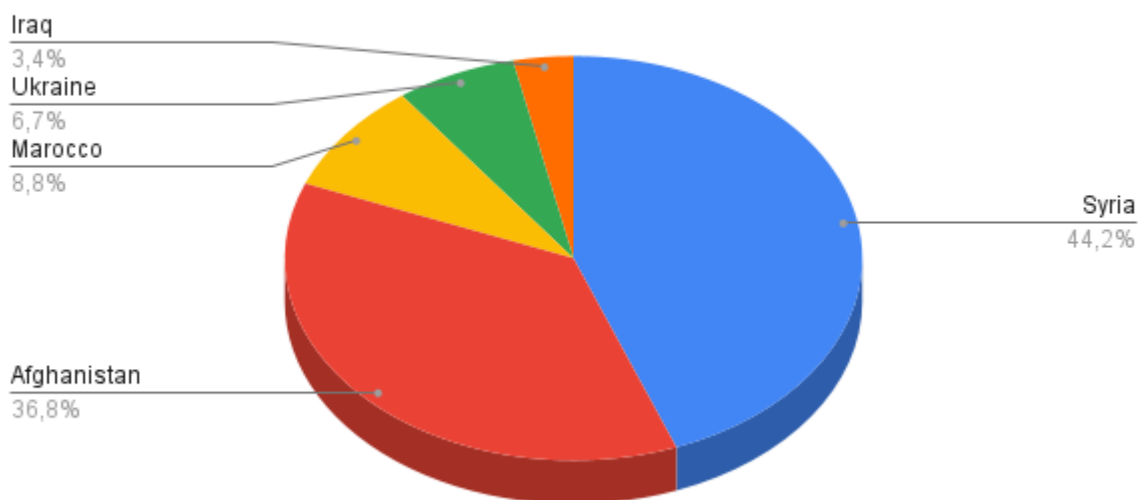


capacity of the SAR territorial units, amounting to 5,530 places, was filled. During the reporting period, due to construction activities, SAR territorial units provided 3,592 places. In October 2022, the occupancy rate for asylum seekers reached a record high of 75%. The largest number of persons accommodated were Syrians at 82%, followed by Afghan nationals. The persons accommodated in the centres have received a range of services, social and health care. In 2022, 6,459 asylum seekers were registered with a General Practitioner, marking a 35% increase over the previous year. In 2022, 144 persons were identified as in need of specialised psychological care. The latter have been referred to support organisations where appropriate support has been provided.

In terms of top countries of origin in 2022, the largest group of arrivals was from Syria, with 8,598 persons, followed by Afghan nationals – 7,164, Morocco with 1,721 asylum applications submitted, Ukraine – 1,313 asylum applications submitted, and Iraq (656 asylum applications submitted). Compared to the previous year, the number of applications submitted by Syrian nationals has more than doubled, as have those from Morocco and Iraq. Since the last two years, there is an increased number of Moroccan citizens applying for refugee status in Bulgaria.

The graph below shows the percentage distribution of applicants for international protection in Bulgaria for the period 01.01.2022 - 31.12.2022 according to their

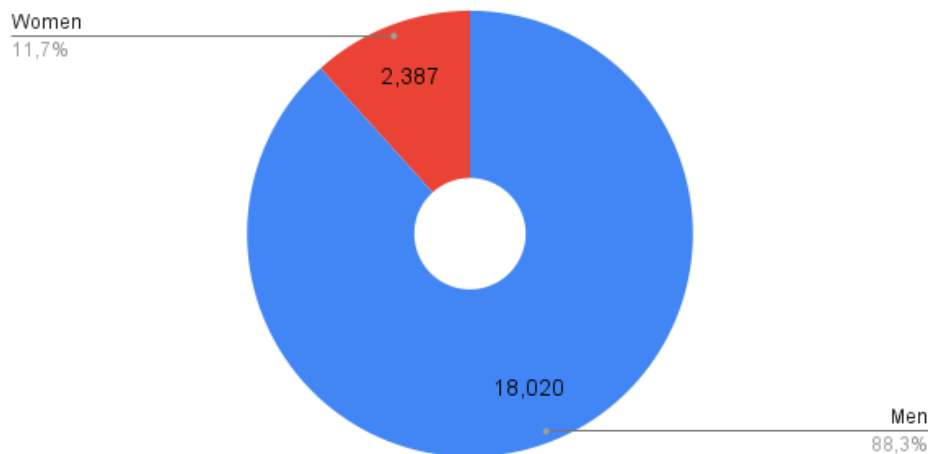
TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN BY NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED IN THE PERIOD 01.01.2022 - 31.12.2022



country of origin.

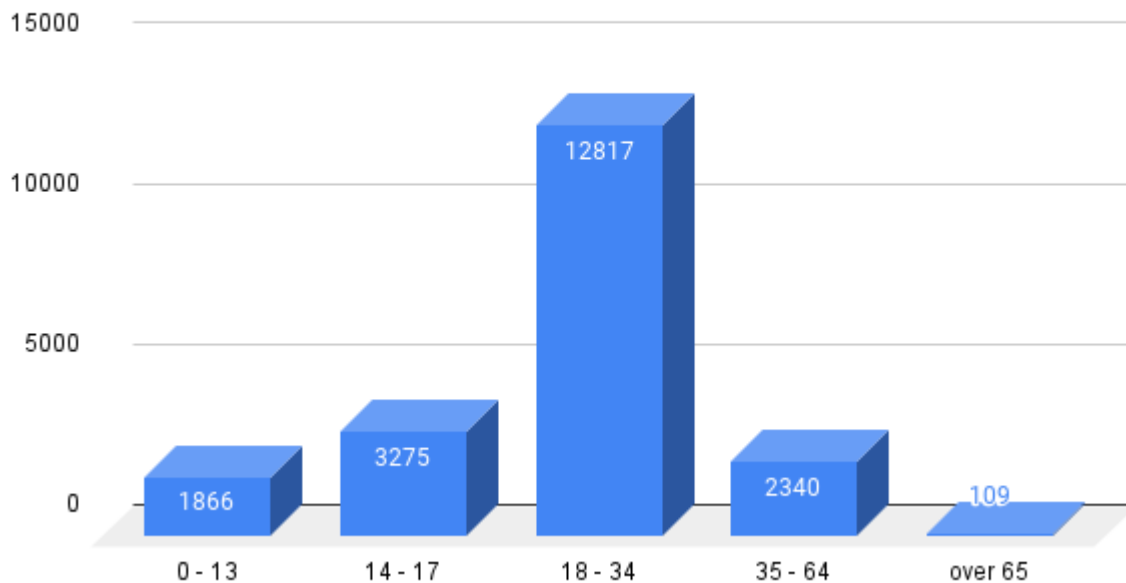
Similarly to previous years, in 2022 almost 90% of the total number of applications for protection were submitted by men.

### Gender distribution of persons applying for protection in Bulgaria in 2022



In terms of age distribution, the category of applicants for protection aged between 18-34 years was the most numerous. Compared to them, asylum seekers aged 14-17 were almost 4 times less. In 2022, the registered applications by children under the age of 13 were 1,866. Traditionally, the number of persons over 65s is low. In 2022 it equated to 109 persons.

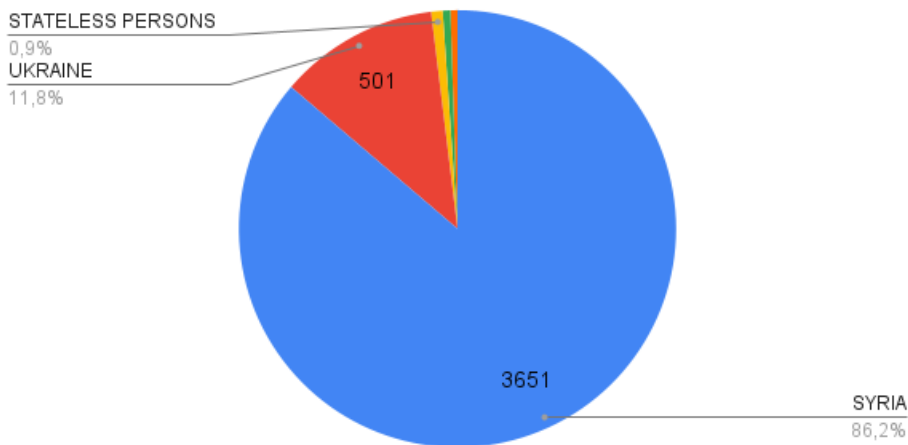
### AGE DISTRIBUTION OF APPLICANTS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION IN BULGARIA IN 2022



### 5.3. RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICATIONS

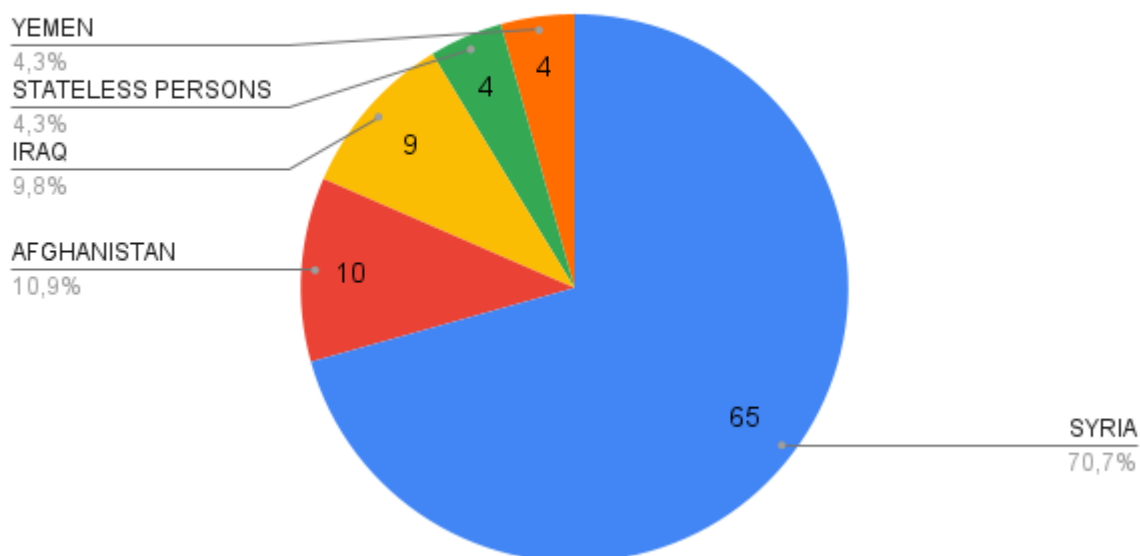
In 2022, international protection was granted to 4,373 persons, with humanitarian status granted to 4,273 persons and refugee status granted to a total of 100 persons, including 56 women and 44 men. The year 2022 marked the greatest number of granted humanitarian status since 1993. In 2022, the overall recognition rate increased to 91% of all substantive decisions. While the overall percentage of recognised refugee status was low, the percentage of granted humanitarian status has increased significantly, marking an 89% rise. Of those granted humanitarian status, the largest numbers were asylum seekers from Syria (3,651), Ukraine (501), stateless persons (36), Afghanistan (24) and Iraq (22).

Top 3 countries of origin of persons granted humanitarian status in 2022



In 2022, the distribution by country of origin of persons granted refugee status was the following: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and stateless persons.

## Top 5 countries of origin of persons granted refugee status in 2022



It is important to note that in 2022 almost 2 times more decisions were issued compared to 2021 on applications for family reunification. 80% of them were submitted by Syrian citizens who have already received international protection and live on the territory of Bulgaria.

### 5.4 FIRST INSTANCE AND FINAL DECISIONS

According to a report by the Asylum Information Database 2022, 46% or 14,474 persons out of 31,592 asylum seekers with pending asylum procedures in Bulgaria in 2022 gave up the asylum procedure last year. This can be explained by delayed procedures (also due to a hacking attack on the SAR database that lasted from mid-April to mid-May), low recognition rates for some nationalities, and the availability of better reception conditions in other European countries. On the other hand, the report also mentions a number of improvements in the standards and quality of the asylum procedure which have had a positive impact on the recognition rate.<sup>9</sup>

**In 2022, the number of rejected applications (denied status) was 199. Most of the rejected applications were of nationals of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. International protection was refused to 160 men and 39 women.** 55% of the decisions to refuse international protection resulted from decisions of the interviewing authority. The number of persons in accelerated proceedings was 246, and it mainly concerned asylum seekers from Morocco, Pakistan and the Russian Federation. 68 % of decisions to discontinue proceedings concerned nationals of Afghanistan.

<sup>9</sup> Asylum Information Database, Country Report: Bulgaria 2022, [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG\\_2022update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG_2022update.pdf)

The total number of persons with terminated proceedings in 2022 amounted to 14,474. Of these, 1,961 concerned Syrian nationals, 9,895 were the cases of Afghan nationals, 963 terminations concerned persons from Morocco and 810 from Ukraine.

In the course of 2022, a total of 159 cases were handled at first and second instance. The Administrative Court of Sofia has rendered 80 decisions, 52 of them in favour of the State Agency for Refugees and 28 in favour of foreigners. Proceedings in 12 cases were discontinued. In 18 cases no decision has been rendered.

In the course of 2022, the Supreme Administrative Court has ruled on 47 decisions, 35 of which were in favour of the State Agency for Refugees and 28 in favour of foreigners who challenged the decision of the Chairperson of the State Agency for Refugees. The Supreme Administrative Court has ordered a review of 4 cases at first instance. No decision has been rendered in 6 cases.

At the end of 2022, the number of persons under procedure was 11,185, which is an increase compared to the number in the previous year (7,556). The SAR report for 2022 noted the efficiency of decision-making: as of 30.06.2022, the number of persons in procedure was 10,146. Taking into account that in the second half of the year 11,567 persons applied for protection, it is positive that in 6 months decisions have been rendered in respect of about 10,000 persons.

## **5.5. RESETTLEMENT AND TRANSFERS**

Regarding the implementation of the Dublin III Regulation, a record number of the take charge and take back requests from Bulgaria and requests for information were received in 2022 – 21,533, an almost threefold increase compared to 2021 when the corresponding number amounted to 7,813. This figure exceeds the number of the take back requests from other Member States in the past years and is linked to the increase in the number of protection applications not only at national but also at European level.

Most requests have been addressed to the Bulgarian state as follows:

| <b>Requesting country</b> | <b>Number of requests</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Austria</b>            | <b>9,131</b>              |
| <b>Germany</b>            | <b>4,900</b>              |
| <b>France</b>             | <b>3,341</b>              |

SAR sent a total of 13,551 replies to take back requests, of which 7,380 were negative and 6,116 positive. 6,116 were also requests for which the Bulgarian services did not reply in time due to the need to check duplicate requests coming from several countries but concerning the same person. According to SAR data, Bulgaria

has taken responsibility for approximately 9,000 persons by default or by explicit positive reply.

Following the temporary suspension of transfers imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, incoming transfers to Bulgaria of asylum seekers under the Dublin system resumed with regular, even increased intensity in 2022. **As of 31.12.2022, a total of 846 incoming transfers have been requested, but only 202 of them have been realised.**<sup>10</sup> The largest number of transfers has been requested from Germany – for 343 persons. Only 87 of them were actually implemented at the end of the reporting period. The number of transfers requested from Austria was 74, while only 33 were implemented. The number of persons requested for transfer from France to Bulgaria was 315, but only 35 of them arrived in the country.

|                | Required transfers | Transfers actually completed |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Austria</b> | <b>74</b>          | <b>33</b>                    |
| <b>Germany</b> | <b>343</b>         | <b>87</b>                    |
| <b>France</b>  | <b>315</b>         | <b>35</b>                    |

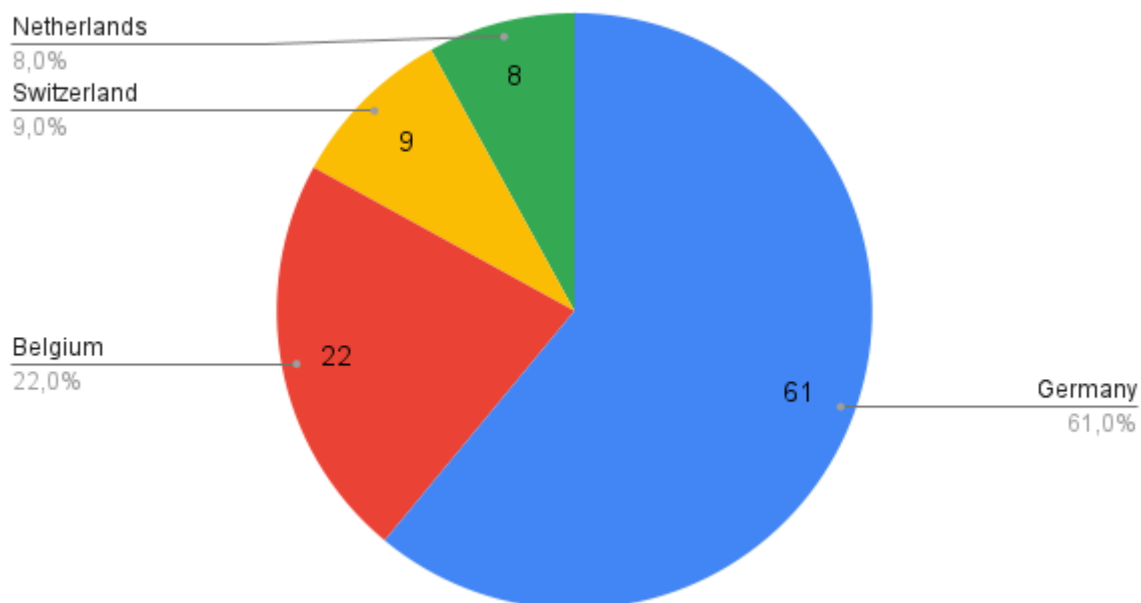
A significant part of the transfers of the persons for whom the Bulgarian State has sent a confirmation of readiness for admission did not take place in 2022 due to the fact that the persons are missing or are in the process of appealing the decision to return them to Bulgaria.

The Bulgaria has sent 175 take charge and take back requests to other Member States. The highest number was sent to Germany – 61 and to Belgium – 22. Almost 50% of these requests were for unaccompanied minors who have relatives on the territory of another Member State. In 2022, a total of 187 replies to outgoing requests were received, including replies to requests from the previous year 2021. Of these 187 replies, 57 were positive and 109 were negative. Reasons for refusal included: lack of evidence of family ties, lack of translation of documents. According to the SAR, cases without legal grounds for refusal were increasing.

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<sup>10</sup> Report on the activities of the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers for 2022.

## External enquiries to other Member States in 2022



In 2022, Bulgaria completed 77 transfers. It is noteworthy that 73 of the transferred persons were unaccompanied minors. The countries with the highest number of transfers were:

|                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Germany</b>     | <b>22 persons</b> |
| <b>Belgium</b>     | <b>17 persons</b> |
| <b>Netherlands</b> | <b>5 persons</b>  |
| <b>France</b>      | <b>5 persons</b>  |

There were no resettlements in 2022. In October 2022, 50 third-country nationals or stateless persons were approved for resettlement in 2023 by Decision 719 of the Council of Ministers. The planned resettlements are of Syrian refugees from Turkey. In order to prepare and plan for the resettlement, an EUAA Resettlement and Humanitarian Reception Network meeting was held in Istanbul in December.<sup>11</sup>

### 5.6. EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

In 2022, the Bulgarian institutions, in particular the State Agency for Refugees, maintained and further reinforced the successful and long-standing cooperation with international organisations such as the UNHCR, IOM, Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants (BCRM), UNICEF, etc. Bilateral meetings and discussions on the current situation were held between the Chairperson of the State Agency for Refugees and

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

representatives of the US Embassy, the Ambassador of Afghanistan in Bulgaria, with representatives of the International Rescue Committee, and representatives of the German Federal Police. In order to exchange experience and within the framework of a project to enhance the administrative capacity of the competent authorities in the field of asylum and migration, visits were organised to the Asylum Office of the Republic of Cyprus, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees of Germany, a meeting with representatives of the Federal Office for Asylum and Migration of Austria, a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania.



## 6. MINORS AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

### 6.1 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS SEEKING OR GRANTED INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION - STATISTICS, TRENDS AND FINDINGS

In 2022, a total of **3,348 unaccompanied minors<sup>12</sup> were registered in Bulgaria**, representing 17% of the total number of applications submitted for the period (20,407 applications). This number marked a record in the number of applications registered for unaccompanied minors since 1993. In 2021, the number of registered unaccompanied minors was 3,172. The highest number of applications was by unaccompanied minors who are Afghan nationals, with 1,803 applications, representing 54% of the total. The second largest number of applications were registered minors from Syria – 1,383 applications (41%).

During the reporting period, a total of **149,268 persons were registered for temporary protection**, of which **52,274 were accompanied minors and 589 were unaccompanied minors**.

In 2022, continued the joint activities of the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (SAR), the Social Assistance Directorates, the Social Assistance Agency and the Child Protection Departments with regard to the placement of unaccompanied minors granted international protection in social services. This activity was aimed at applying an individual approach and taking special care of unaccompanied minors with a view to the best interest of the child. In connection with the implementation of the activity, the State Agency for Refugees prepared and approved **Internal Rules for the organisation of the accommodation of unaccompanied minors who have received international protection** in foster families, social or integrated health and social services for residential care. During the reporting period, the number of unaccompanied minors accommodated in social services was 29, with an increase of almost 3.6 times compared to 2021, when the number of the accommodated unaccompanied minors was 8.

In 2022, **IOM Bulgaria continued its work to ensure the functioning of the two Safe Zones for unaccompanied minors seeking international protection**. During the reporting period, the Safe Zone in the Registration and Reception Centre (RRC) of SAR in the Sofia district of Voenna rampa provided support to a total of 1,543 unaccompanied minors (all boys) of the following nationalities: Afghanistan – 1,532; Pakistan – 10 and Iran – 1.

In the Safe Zone of the SAR RRC in the district of Ovcha kupel, Sofia support was provided to 573 unaccompanied minors (all boys) from the following nationalities: Syria – 502; Egypt – 22; Morocco –17; Somalia – 14; Iraq – 13; Palestine (stateless)– 4; Libya – 1.

The average age of unaccompanied minors placed in the two Safe Zones was 16 years.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

IOM Bulgaria teams provided support to unaccompanied minors for: registration and accommodation; 24/7 support and care; 24/7 security; individual and/or group social, psychological and legal counselling; accompaniment to hospital or dental centres and for the purchase of medicines. IOM Bulgaria also provided support for the initiation of reunification procedures for children with their family members under the Dublin III Regulation and the Family Reunification Directive (for children whose relatives live in England, for example), in cooperation with the State Agency for Refugees and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. The IOM Bulgaria teams conducted daily sports activities with unaccompanied minors – football, volleyball, fencing, cricket, table tennis and basketball, as well as informal educational activities such as English, Bulgarian, mathematics and computer skills courses, and the children were also provided with homework support for school.

At the end of 2022, with the support of IOM, the number of group information sessions for unaccompanied minors accommodated in the two Safe Zones at the RRCs in Sofia increased due to the identified needs. The sessions were held on topics related to the development of children, the specific challenges typical for the adolescent period, the needs for wider social contacts, as well as the specificity of their relationships with their families.

In 2022, the **Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria carried out inspections in the structures of the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers in connection with the functions of the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM)**, performed in implementation of Orders No. RD-08-72/07.07.2022 and No. RD-08-77/20.07.2022. The report<sup>13</sup> indicates that during the period 01.01.2022 to 30.06.2022 the number of children who were placed in the RRC – Harmanli was 185, 68 of whom were unaccompanied. Most of them were between the age of 14 and 17 and almost all of them were boys. The report states that the RRC – Harmanli did not have a safe zone for unaccompanied minors seeking international protection and as a result of the inspection, the Ombudsman as the National Preventive Mechanism made a recommendation to the Chairperson of SAR that a safe zone for unaccompanied minors be established in the RRC – Harmanli.

During the reporting period, the **State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) carried out a planned inspection on the observance of children's rights in the territorial units of the State Agency for Refugees in the period May-June 2022**. The purpose of the inspection was to ensure that children's rights are respected during their stay in Registration and Reception Centres of the State Agency for Refugees. According to the Law on Asylum and Refugees, Article 25a, paragraph 2, the Chairperson of the SACP has the right to monitor and control in the territorial units of SAR the reception conditions of minors seeking international protection, as well as the observance of their rights and the prevention of physical and psychological violence, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This provides a

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<sup>13</sup> Report of the National Preventive Mechanism on inspections carried out in structures of the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers

[https://www.ombudsman.bg/storage/pub/files/20221012141950\\_%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%20-%D1%8E%D0%BB%D0%B8%202022.pdf](https://www.ombudsman.bg/storage/pub/files/20221012141950_%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%20-%D1%8E%D0%BB%D0%B8%202022.pdf)

further opportunity for independent external control of children's rights, particularly for the group of unaccompanied and separated refugee children, who are at very high risk of being involved in trafficking, drug use, abuse and violence.

In the summary of an analysis of the results<sup>14</sup> published by SACP, the following findings and conclusions were made with regard to unaccompanied minors.

- During the inspection in the RRC – Harmanli the need to establish a "Safe Zone" for the children accommodated in the centre was identified, for which a proposal was made to the SAR;
- Regarding the inspection on the right to protection against violence, no cases of violence against children were found in the inspected RRCs. No complaints about the living conditions in the centres, incidents nor non-compliance with internal order involving children were registered. No risks to unaccompanied children were identified;
- With regard to the institutional set-up of the RRC, it was found that the Internal Rules for the Conduct of Proceedings for Granting International Protection at the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers were applied. For each of the unaccompanied children, a representative from the National Legal Aid Bureau has been appointed. For each unaccompanied minor, a social worker from the relevant Social Assistance Directorate was also assigned, who was notified and present during the interview. The Safe Zones have developed additional internal rules of use, defining the rights and obligations of the accommodated children and describing the procedure for imposing sanctions in case of non-compliance. From the conducted discussions it was found that individual and group work with children and families is carried out by interviewers, registrars and social workers in the RRC. A responsible officer is assigned for each unaccompanied minor. A good organisation of work has been established.
- Regarding the difficulties in the interaction between the institutions at local level in the RRC – Harmanli, it has been found that there were difficulties in issuing identity documents to unaccompanied minors related to the impossibility to have a registered address. Insufficient coordination and communication between the centre's staff and the children's lawyers was found, which created a feeling of chaotic situation.
- As a result of the conducted discussions, a number of difficulties in working with the children placed in the RRC have been identified. Difficulties continue to be identified in the cases of children granted international protection who need to be placed with a foster family, in a family-type placement centre or in another social service. Other difficulties in the work were: the refusal of General Practitioners to record refugees in their patient lists; the lack of sufficient interpreters, which prevents the provision of adequate social and psychological support for migrants; the lack of adequate psychological support provided due to the limited number of specialist psychologists in the RRC; the synchronisation of the officials who should be present at the interview; the lack of coordination in the work of the different officials with the unaccompanied minors; the insufficient involvement of lawyers – representatives of the

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<sup>14</sup> Summary of the analysis of the results of a planned inspection on the observance of the rights of the child in the territorial divisions of the State Agency for Refugees 2022  
<https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/2022-08/rezumeanalizrpc2022.pdf>

children, including reluctance to visit the RRC when necessary. Apart from the non-governmental organisations that work on the ground in the centres, there was no practice of referring children to other external social services.

## **6.2 ACTIONS AND MECHANISMS AT NATIONAL LEVEL IN THE FIELD OF SUPPORT FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINORS**

In June 2021, Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee was adopted. The main objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent social exclusion by ensuring that children in need have access to key services such as pre-school and early childhood care, education (including school activities), health, nutrition and accommodation.

In order to implement the Recommendation in Bulgaria in 2022, the "**Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee (2030)**"<sup>15</sup> was adopted by Decision No 879 of the Council of Ministers of 09.11.2022. The Plan covers the main target groups of children identified in the Recommendation, among which are children with a migrant background and children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children in a precarious family environment.

Special attention is paid to the category of **unaccompanied minors** in the Plan when identifying the main target groups and specifically the group of refugee and migrant children. The Plan points out that a challenge remains the inclusion in the education system of unaccompanied minors of compulsory school age, who for the school year 2021-2022 make up 87%, or 1,323 children in this age group. The main reasons highlighted are that a large number of children in this group are illiterate in their own language, have no interest in education and no desire to settle in the country, and have been for a short time in the SAR territorial units.

The Plan also draws attention to developments in relation to the military conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing migration processes which brought to the increased number of persons seeking protection in Bulgaria. Among them, there are many parents with children. According to SAR's data, as of 09.08.2022, 47 890 children from Ukraine have sought temporary protection, of whom 516 were unaccompanied. In the context of the international situation, the Plan identifies the provision of timely and targeted support and protection for children from the military conflict in Ukraine, who may also be unaccompanied minors, as a priority.

In Annex 2 of the Plan, entitled "Areas of impact, measures and activities", **unaccompanied minors** are covered by Measure 2 "Ensuring access to the education system and an inclusive environment for children and students seeking or granted international protection, including unaccompanied minors, of compulsory pre-school and school age" in the area of impact "Inclusive education and school activities". The measure includes activities to improve the process of referral, reception and education of children and pupils, seeking or granted international protection, including unaccompanied minors; to increase the capacity of professionals to work with refugee

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<sup>15</sup> Action plan in implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 to establish a European Child Guarantee (2030)

<https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1560>

and migrant children, including unaccompanied minors, and a multidisciplinary approach to assessing the best interests of the child; to provide additional training in Bulgarian as a foreign language to children and pupils seeking or granted international protection, including unaccompanied minors, of compulsory pre-school and school age; to hold regular information sessions and individual consultations with parents and children, including unaccompanied minors seeking international protection.

With regard to the impact area "Appropriate housing", Measure 3 "Improving the effectiveness of the identification process of unaccompanied minors" is relevant for the group of unaccompanied minors, Improving the quality of accommodation of unaccompanied minors in the Special Home for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SHTAF) of the Migration Directorate and improving the living environment of accompanied migrant children for the duration of their stay in the SHTAF, ensuring that the accommodation of children in the SHTAF is a measure of last resort for a very short period of time and only when other less restrictive measures are not feasible. The measure includes enhancing the professional qualification of police officers to work with migrant and refugee children and improving the material conditions for the accommodation of children and families in SHTAF. Also of relevance is Measure 4 "Ensuring appropriate accommodation conditions for children seeking and receiving international protection", consisting of activities to ensure appropriate material accommodation conditions and adequate care and social services for unaccompanied minors seeking and receiving international protection and to conduct multidisciplinary training on child best interest assessment and case work for children seeking and receiving international protection.

In April 2022, a **Coordination Mechanism for interaction between institutions and organisations in cases of unaccompanied minors or foreign children separated from their families on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, including children seeking and/or granted international or temporary protection**<sup>16</sup>, was established at national level. The main objective of the Coordination Mechanism is to improve inter-institutional cooperation with regard to the provision of protection to unaccompanied minors who are particularly vulnerable, as well as to ensure effective coordination and coherence in the implementation of the specific obligations of all parties involved, with a view to ensuring respect for the rights of children. The consolidation of the Mechanism, expected in 2014, is a development of major importance in this area, as it brings more clarity to the roles and responsibilities of institutions in cases of unaccompanied minors on Bulgarian territory. Its positive aspects are the envisaged obligations to notify the child protection system in each case, the introduction of a 24/7 working regime and the envisaged monitoring system for the implementation of the mechanism. The system for the implementation of the inter-institutional approach obliges the child protection authorities at central, regional and local level, other responsible institutions and organisations, within the framework of their competences, in accordance with the current legal framework of the mechanism, to undertake the following actions:

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<sup>16</sup> Coordination mechanism for interaction between the authorities and organisations working on cases of unaccompanied minors or foreign children separated from their families in Bulgaria, including children seeking and/or receiving international or temporary protection. (Coordination Mechanism)

<https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/regulatorybase/koordinacionen-mekhanizm-zakrila.pdf>

1. Identification of the foreign child as unaccompanied or separated, referral and placement.

Option 1: upon crossing the state border

Option 2: in the interior of the country

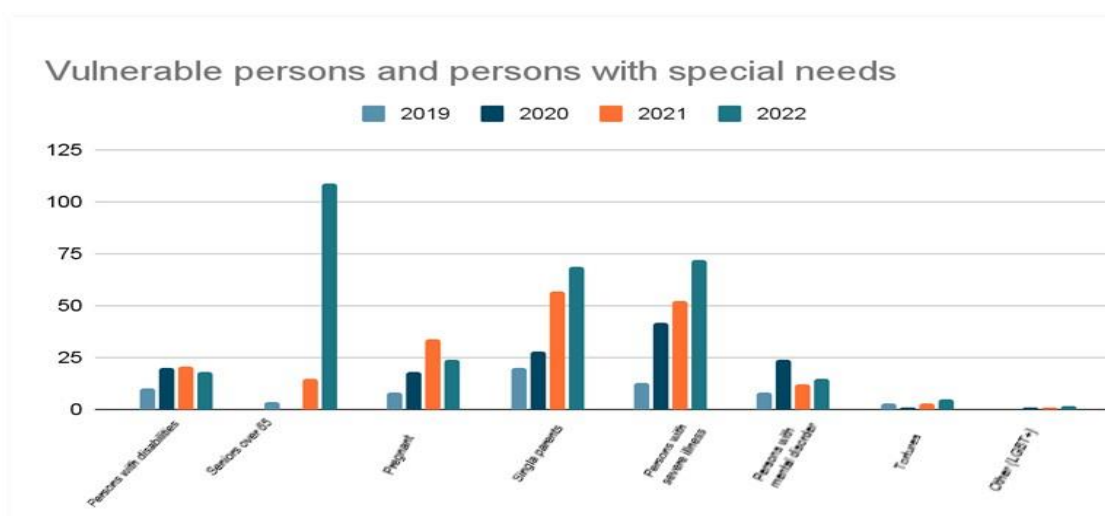
2. Ensuring the rights of unaccompanied or separated foreign children by ensuring an adequate standard of living, access to health care, education, social support and adaptation.
3. A long-term solution for the protection of unaccompanied or separated minors.
4. The interaction between the Ministry of Interior, SAR and the Social Assistance Directorates under the Coordination Mechanism is carried out in the conditions of continuity in the implementation of their powers to work – in 24/7 mode, on holidays and weekends.
5. An Emergency Response Coordination Network is being established in the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) to ensure in 24/7 mode the right to protection and/or to a safe environment and accommodation in urgent cases, comprising 28 contact points at the level of regional Social Assistance Directorate at the SAA with operational teams in each contact point in the Social Assistance Directorate in the respective district as child protection authorities.

The Coordination Mechanism is updated periodically, in accordance with the normative changes regulating the competences of the institutions involved in the work on cases of unaccompanied minors or when the need arises in the practice of the institutions.

### 6.3 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS WHO DO NOT APPLY FOR OR HAVE NOT BEEN GRANTED INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

In 2022, 182 unaccompanied minors were identified and handed over to the Social Assistance Directorate under Article 63k of the Regulation implementing the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria.

In 2022, **213 vulnerable persons were identified** in the territorial subdivisions of the SAR, as compared to 195 in 2021. Vulnerable persons identified through a needs



assessment form and further referred for consultation with a specialist include persons with mental disorders, persons who have suffered torture, rape or other severe forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence.

Among the vulnerable persons and persons with special needs, the largest number is unaccompanied minors. During the reporting period, 3,348 unaccompanied minors seeking international protection were registered with the SAR.

In 2022, IOM Bulgaria's mobile protection teams provided a total of 2,876 consultations in the SAR's Registration and Reception Centres and the Special Home for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners, with 782 psychological consultations, including psychiatric assistance, specialised one-to-one discussions with unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable persons.

In June 2022, the new Special Needs and Vulnerability Assessment (SNVA) tool of the new European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) was presented to the SAR experts responsible for social activities.



# 7. INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

## 7.1 GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATION

In 2022, **49 Integration Profiles were prepared for foreigners** wishing to remain in Bulgaria after obtaining refugee or humanitarian status.

In accordance with Article 13 of the Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for Conducting, Implementation and Termination of the Agreement for Integration of Foreigners Granted Asylum or International Protection, the mayor of the municipality wishing to conclude an integration agreement submits an application to the SAR. In 2022, **5 agreements on integration** of foreigners granted protection were signed with the mayor of Ovcha Kupel district, City of Sofia.

During the reporting period, the experts on social activities from the SAR held information sessions with the accommodated persons in order to introduce them to the possibilities for support after obtaining the status, employment during the procedure, as well as specific proposals from employers. The persons with the right to work have been referred for the issuance of a certification document by the SAR and have been assisted in the processing of their applications.

## 7.2 SOCIAL ADAPTATION AND CULTURAL ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES

Within the framework of the process of social adaptation and cultural orientation of asylum seekers - either independently by the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers or jointly with representatives of the NGO sector in the field of migration - various thematic events, sports festivals and celebrations, art activities, including film screenings, theatre and graffiti fest, as well as other events in and outside the centres of the State Agency for Refugees have been organised in 2022.

During the reporting period, activities continued under the "**Welcome to Bulgaria! Family Football Training Sessions for Refugees**" project, funded under the UEFA "Football for Refugees" programme and implemented by the Bulgarian Sports Federation for Disadvantaged Persons in partnership with the Bulgarian Football Union. Within the framework of the project, weekly football training sessions were held in the RRC Sofia and in the RRC in Harmanli. The activities organized by the SAR on domestic adaptation of asylum seekers continued, with a focus on women and unaccompanied children.

A special module of informative talks on topics related to health care and dermatological hygiene, as well as practices that are oriented towards self-care – physically, emotionally and socially – was implemented in the RRC Sofia during the **workshop for creative and social activities "Studio for young and adults"**.

In 2022, the SAR organised events to present different cultures as well as Bulgarian customs. Various socio-cultural events, creative workshops, sports festivals, martenitsa making workshops, Easter egg dyeing, decoupage, celebration of the Persian New Year, Children's Day, etc. were organised for the asylum seekers accommodated in RRC Sofia. To mark Refugee Day, on the initiative of the SAR and in cooperation with the Bulgarian Red Cross, various activities were held together with the asylum seekers, including a visit to the screening of the documentary film "The



Unaccompanied" and the performance "Shelter"; a visit to the Sofia Zoo; the opening of an exhibition of children's drawings a treat for the guests in the framework of a cooking workshop for traditional dishes; a trip to the Pancharevo Lake with the support of the UNHCR, etc. A festive concert dedicated to the Refugee Day was held in in the town of Harmanli, with the participation of asylum-seeking children accommodated in the RRC Harmanli.

Within the framework of the **project "The Children of Refugees and the Children of Bulgaria in Search of Interactive Theatre"**, implemented by the "Zabel Voice" Foundation, children accommodated in the RRC Sofia, Ovcha kupel district took part in theatre workshops. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Syria took part in the competition of the State Agency for Child Protection "Guarantee a Happy Child" and three of the children were awarded with incentive prizes. Once again, asylum seekers joined the "Let's Clean Bulgaria Together" initiative.

IOM Bulgaria participated as a partner in the 13th edition of the **Sofia MENAR Film Festival** dedicated to cinema from the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa with a total of five screenings of three films on migration. The films were shown in several cinemas and cultural centres in Sofia and Harmanli. During the opening event in Sofia, a student from New Bulgarian University presented the photographic exhibition "Faces of Diversity", prepared together with a Bulgarian journalist from the town of Harmanli within the European Horizon 2020 research project "MATIDLE". During the film festival the asylum seekers accommodated in the three units of the RRC Sofia had the opportunity to watch online screenings of the films from the festival programme. More than 70 children attended the screenings, most of them unaccompanied.

In 2022, the implementation of the **project "Support for the Future"** under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism's Home Affairs Programme started by Caritas - Bulgaria and Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria. The project aims to contribute to improving the conditions and national capacities for the reception of international protection seekers, with a focus on unaccompanied minors. As of February 2023, more than 900 children from the refugee centres in Sofia and Harmanli have benefited from specialised care focusing on personal needs. The activities of the project, implemented on the territory of RRC Sofia and RRC Harmanli, included: methodological support and literacy activities in Bulgarian language; consultations on vocational guidance, career guidance and personal development; health sessions and prevention of aggressive behaviour; work with parents to support and motivate the inclusion of children in the Bulgarian education system; conducting creative workshops, etc.

In October 2022, the **sixth edition of "Graffiti Fest Harmanli"** took place, during which the wall of the Registration and Reception Centre in the town of Harmanli is painted annually. The festival was attended by students from "Ivan Vazov" Primary School, as well as unaccompanied minors seeking protection, accommodated in RRC Harmanli. The event was held in partnership with Caritas Sofia. The graffiti festival that IOM organises annually in Harmanli has been reviewed by the European Website on Integration (EWSI)<sup>17</sup> as an example of good practice.

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<sup>17</sup> The European Website on Integration (EWSI)

[https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/integration-practice/bulgaria-graffiti-festival\\_en?fbclid=IwAR0QgVY2YuCHz76PIQV9W\\_VCfDnXnYmycLP8l\\_GJjJ-BRfIyuhZ3ZcHcKmE](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/integration-practice/bulgaria-graffiti-festival_en?fbclid=IwAR0QgVY2YuCHz76PIQV9W_VCfDnXnYmycLP8l_GJjJ-BRfIyuhZ3ZcHcKmE)

During the reporting period, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – Bulgaria implemented a **project "Providing integration support to persons seeking or granted international protection"**, aimed at activities to facilitate the **social and cultural adaptation and integration** of third-country nationals with legal residence in Bulgaria, including persons benefiting from international protection. Within the framework of the project, IOM provides administrative, legal, health, psychological and social assistance. Among the main objectives of the project is to ease the process of integration of the TCNs in the Bulgarian society by providing support with special attention to the needs of vulnerable persons according to directive 2008/115/EC.

In 2022, **9 information meetings were also organised for legally resident migrants** in Sofia, Plovdiv, Pomorie, Ravda, Nessebar and Varna on topics that are relevant for migrant communities such as access to the labour market and Bulgarian labour legislation, access to healthcare and inclusion in the National Health Insurance Program, payment of taxes in Bulgaria, different types of residence permits in Bulgaria, access to education, etc.

In the Information Centre for Migrants in Sofia, individual and group consultations with migrants continued on issues related to the possibilities of support, as well as on individual cases of a legal and social nature. In the period January – October 2022, a total of **678 consultations** were held in the Information Centre in Sofia (individual and group consultations on issues related to the social and cultural adaptation of citizens of third countries, access to institutions and labour rights of migrants).

In 2022, a number of activities were carried out in the Registration and Reception Centres of the State Agency for Refugees in Sofia and Harmanli with the aim of providing **consultations to 65 accommodated persons**. Consultations were also held for persons accommodated in the centres of the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior, who have applied for international protection. The aim of these activities was to reach the maximum number of migrants who are at the initial stage of their international protection procedures and to familiarise them with basic information about the functioning and policies of the country regarding the support they can receive. They were also made aware of the commitments they have to comply with the laws and rules of the host society.

At the end of 2022, IOM Bulgaria successfully completed a **project focused on the implementation of activities to increase the awareness of Bulgarian society and migrant communities in Bulgaria**. The activities carried out within the framework of the project aimed to contribute to the improvement of public solidarity and tolerance of the Bulgarian society, in its capacity as a host society, towards legal migrants, persons seeking international protection or who have received international protection in Bulgaria. A special focus of the project was to acquaint Bulgarian society with the problems and needs of migrants and, in particular, vulnerable migrants, such as unaccompanied minors, persons with health problems, pregnant women, victims of human trafficking, etc. The total number of persons covered by the project from 2017 to October 2022 was 131,559 TCNs: persons seeking and benefiting from international protection, including women: 65,565 and men: 65,994.

The activities carried out within the framework of the project, through which the above mentioned persons, as well as Bulgarian citizens, are covered, are the following:

- Preparation of three video materials with the aim of informing the migrant communities in Bulgaria and supporting their cultural adaptation, as well as informing the Bulgarian society and broadcasting the video materials on national television channels within 6 campaigns;
- Organization of a seminar on "Education of unaccompanied minors seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria" in Panagyurishte;
- Organization of a seminar on the topic "Administrative and social issues affecting the legally resident TCNs in Bulgaria" in the village of Ravda;
- Organization of a round table on "Relocation of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection from Greece" in Sofia;
- Organization of a round table on "Social services and support for children seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria" in Plovdiv;
- Organization of a working meeting on the topic "Initial adaptation and integration of TCNs in Bulgaria" in the village of Ravda;
- Organization of a workshop on "Access to education for children seeking or receiving international or temporary protection" in Burgas;
- Organization of a seminar on "Migration and refugees – media coverage and prevention of hate speech" in Sofia;
- Dance workshop for studying Bulgarian folk dances from third-country nationals in Harmanli;
- Dance workshop for learning oriental dances for Bulgarian citizens in Harmanli;
- Multicultural information events in Harmanli and Nessebar with the participation of migrant communities and Bulgarian citizens;
- Information meetings on the topic "Bulgarian culture and traditions" for persons seeking international protection, accommodated in the Registration and Reception Centres of the State Agency for Refugees, and foreigners, accommodated in the Special Homes for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SHTAF) of the Ministry of Interior;
- Development of a Bulgarian section in the IOM MigApp mobile application with information on the history, culture and traditions of Bulgaria;
- Four theatrical events on a theme related to migration in the cities of Sofia, Pleven, Pazardzhik and Plovdiv;
- Culinary event presenting migrant cuisine in Harmanli.

In 2022, the implementation of activities under the **project "Empowering young migrants and refugees through innovative practices for a more inclusive (post) pandemic and (post) crisis Bulgaria"** continued. The project is implemented by "Policy and Citizens' Observatory: Migration, Digitalization, Climate" with the financial support provided by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism.

Among the activities carried out is the three-day leadership competences workshop, in which twenty participants took part – young people from Bulgaria and migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Italy, Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. During the three days of the workshop, the youth participated in a series of training. The activities carried out within the framework of the Three-Day Workshop "Leaders on the Square" provided an opportunity for all participants to acquire key leadership, media and intercultural competencies. Participants also gained useful skills to promote advocacy, active citizenship and leadership through the **experiential learning** methodology. Within the framework of the project, an online debate on the topic "Fundamental Economics and Migration" was held as part of the series of online debates on the

future "Migrant-Refugee Youth and the Pandemic: New Leadership for a More Inclusive Post-Crisis World".

### **7.3 INCLUSION IN THE LABOUR MARKET**

In 2022, with regard to the employment of asylum seekers, the SAR issued **302 official notices for access to the labour market.**

During the reporting period, the **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** in Bulgaria implemented the **project "Increasing awareness of labour migration in Bulgaria"** in coordination and operational cooperation with the IOM missions in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. The main goal of the project was to provide support to potential labour migrants from Armenia, Georgia and Moldova to facilitate the process of making a decision to relocate to Bulgaria, as well as providing comprehensive information on living and working conditions in Bulgaria.

Among the first initiatives aimed at facilitating the inclusion of Ukrainians who received temporary protection in Bulgaria in the labour market was the holding of career forums by the American Embassy in Sofia, together with the America for Bulgaria Foundation and the American Chamber of Commerce. The forums aimed to provide an opportunity for a direct meeting between Ukrainians and business, as several events were organised in the New Boyana Film Studio, as well as in the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna. A similar targeted forum was organised by the Employment Agency (EA) on 11 May in Sofia. Ukrainian citizens were also encouraged to participate in a number of traditional EA labour exchanges. On 19 May, 2022, the largest such forum so far took place at the Inter Expo Centre in Sofia, which was organised by UNHCR in cooperation with eight non-governmental organisations. There was also a great activity from the private sector, where corporate social responsibility policies were developed. Many companies made generous donations, mainly to the organisations that work on the ground. Representatives of the technology business were also active in their efforts to help evacuate entire companies from Ukraine to Bulgaria.

### **7.4 DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION**

In 2022, **118 children seeking international protection were included in the Bulgarian education system** with the assistance of the SAR. 19 information sessions were also held for the inclusion of children seeking protection in the Bulgarian education system.

Within the framework of the activities of the SAR to conduct training in Bulgarian language for foreigners seeking protection in 2022, additional classes in Bulgarian language and informal training were conducted by a specialist in the RRC Sofia, Ovcha kupel district. Activities related to the study of the Bulgarian language were also carried out in the organised workshop for creative and social activity "Studio for young and adults", as well as by Caritas – Bulgaria, under the project "Support for the Future". In the RRC Harmanli, the average attendance of Bulgarian language courses is 23 participants, and in the RRC Sofia – 9 participants.

In 2022, the **Information Centre for Migrants** in Sofia organised Bulgarian language courses at the elementary level (A1 and A2) for 304 third-country nationals.

Since the start of the project, 1,104 migrants have successfully passed through this measure.

As part of the integration activities of IOM Bulgaria during the reporting period, **367 adult students attended online courses in Bulgarian**. Also, as part of the integration measures, the IOM, aimed at Ukrainians, provided free Bulgarian language courses for Ukrainian citizens, and in the period February – December 2022, a total of 547 Ukrainians with temporary protection successfully completed Bulgarian language courses at the A1 level and/or A2 and have received certificates of achievement.

Already in the first days after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) published procedures and applications for enrolling Ukrainian children in state and municipal schools. Responsible officers in each regional education department were determined and information material was created with the enrolment procedure. On 30-31 March, 2022, the MES and UNHCR organised a meeting of all 28 Regional Departments of Education in the country, where operational issues regarding the inclusion of children were discussed.

The number of Bulgarian language courses provided by NGOs has been increased, mainly by the Bulgarian Red Cross and Caritas Sofia. With the help of funding from UNHCR, the BCRM was given the opportunity to organise language training outside of Sofia as well. A number of volunteer initiatives were also implemented, such as the creation of online platforms where volunteers train refugees. In various places in the country, regional libraries, community centres, centres for personal development support, children's centres and even regional administrations organised free Bulgarian language courses. In some places, university professors were involved in teaching them completely free of charge, as is the case in Blagoevgrad and the Southwest University "Neofit Rilski".

In 2022, the team of CERMES – Centre for European Refugee, Migration and Ethical Studies at the New Bulgarian University carried out various activities within the **international research project REFUGE-ED<sup>18</sup> "Effective practices in education, mental health and psychosocial support for the integration of children refugees"**. REFUGE-ED is an international collaborative research project funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 Framework Program for Research and Innovation. In Bulgaria, the project has been implemented in the two Safe Zones for unaccompanied minors in the RRC Sofia and in three public schools in Sofia, which have experience in teaching students of different origins. REFUGE-ED is a project that aims to identify, implement and evaluate evidence-based effective practices in education and mental health and psychosocial support that have shown efficacy in promoting the active inclusion of migrant children. In particular, these effective practices have demonstrated improvements in the educational success, well-being and sense of belonging of all children from recent migration groups, refugees and asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, including those residing in hotspots, reception/identification centres and initial care. During the reporting period, in the three schools in Sofia participating in the project, the following successful educational actions, proposed within the framework of the project, were implemented: Dialogic literary reading and Interactive groups.

In July 2022, the two-day **training on "Effective educational and psychosocial practices to support refugee, asylum seeking and migrant children"** took place within the European project REFUGE-ED. The aim of the training was to exchange

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.refuge-ed.eu/>

experiences and learn new effective practices and techniques in education and psychological health and psychosocial support that promote the educational success and well-being of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children, including unaccompanied minors. The training included teachers and psychologists from three secondary schools in the city of Sofia, representatives of international and Bulgarian organisations, as well as state institutions dealing with migration and refugee issues.

## **7.5 FORUMS AND PROJECTS**

Within the framework of the European project MATILDE "Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Areas" in April 2022, a **round table was held in town of Harmanli on the topic "Local development and innovative practices of migration, mobility, integration and inclusion"**. The purpose of the round table was to analyse innovative and good practices of inclusion, integration and boosting of local and regional development through the efforts of citizens, migrants and refugees, schools, community centres, businesses and the civil sector. The forum was attended by representatives of state institutions, four mayors of villages, journalists, representatives of business, the civil sector and international organisations, schools and academic circles, as well as the migrant community. The event, organised by CERMES and Caritas Bulgaria, was an excellent opportunity to discuss different points of view regarding the migration and integration of third-country nationals in the region as multi-level processes. Within the framework of the forum, recommendations were formulated to optimise the contribution and role of intercultural factors for local development. The round table was accompanied by a poetry recital "Poetry – a bridge between cultures" and the opening of the photo exhibition "Faces of Diversity". The exhibition was also exhibited at the Historical Museum in Harmanli, as part of the program of the Night of Museums 2022. The holding of the round table was widely covered in numerous media at local, regional and national level with articles and reports.

In June 2022, a **seminar on "Migration and refugees – media coverage and prevention of hate speech"** was held. The seminar was organised by IOM Bulgaria, in partnership with the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria, UNHCR Bulgaria and Multi Kulti Collective. The event was attended by Bulgarian journalists from all over the country, as well as representatives of diplomatic missions, Bulgarian institutions, universities and international and non-governmental organisations. Topics discussed and presentations included terminology related to international protection procedures, first-person accounts of refugees, refugees and the media, and the legal framework related to hate speech in the media.

In April 2022, IOM Bulgaria, together with UNHCR and UNICEF, organised a **round table "Social services and support for children seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria"** in the city of Plovdiv. The purpose of the round table was to discuss good practices and challenges related to accommodation in social services and provision of social support to children seeking or granted international protection. The focus of the event was on presentations and discussions with up-to-date data on social support services for children seeking or granted international protection and their families, the legal framework and policy implementation at the local level. The round table was attended by representatives of

the state administration, local authorities, as well as various international and non-governmental organisations from all over the country.

In October 2022, an **Anniversary Scientific Conference "Human Rights in a Period of Crisis"** took place at the **New Bulgarian University (NBU)**. The conference was held **under the patronage of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria** and was dedicated to the 30th anniversary of Bulgaria's accession to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Political scientists, lawyers, social workers, teachers and students, scientists, human rights defenders, representatives of institutions, journalists took an active part in the conference.

The first three sessions of the conference were devoted to the themes "Human Rights– Philosophy and Practice", "Pandemic and Rights" and "Rights – Contemporary Challenges". The fourth and fifth sessions focused on **"Migration and Integration" and "Migration and Local Development"**. They were opened by the Chairperson of the SAR with the Council of Ministers, who also participated as a speaker, sharing the Agency's experience in managing migration crises. Various other topics related to the adaptation and the social commitment to Bulgarian society were also presented by experts in the field of migration and migrants who have integrated in Bulgaria.

As part of the intercultural program of the event, the **double exhibition "Faces of Diversity" meets "The Worlds of Refugee Children"** was opened with photographs of migrants and drawings of refugee children accommodated in the RRC Sofia, Ovcha Kupel district. The double exhibition "Faces of Diversity" meets "The Worlds of Refugee Children" was also presented at the event on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the SAR in November 2022.

For the second year in a row, CERMES organised the **thematic week "Diversity and Migration"** in New Bulgarian University. Within the framework of the thematic week, through science, teaching and art, various horizons were opened for understanding the connections of migration with development and rights, for sharing innovative policies and practices from the world, Europe and Bulgaria, for building an interdisciplinary community. The campaign "#WHOAREthemigrants" has been launched, which aims to introduce the public to the personal stories of migrants living in Bulgaria. The campaign was aimed at NBU students, who were invited to tell and share true stories of migrants through words or images. During the thematic week "Diversity and Migration" the following events were held: a student seminar "Migration Phenomena"; a field visit for the students of the migration courses of the Political Science Department to the representation of the High Commissioner for Refugees to the United Nations; a screening and a debate on the topic "Forced labour, slavery and human trafficking in the 21st century"; and an open day of the Centre for Migration Studies.

In December 2022, as part of the "#WHOAREthemigrants?" campaign and on the occasion of the International Day of Migrants – December 18, a **Migration Biennale was held at the New Bulgarian University**. 10 organisations participated in the biennale, including CERMES, IOM Bulgaria, Caritas Sofia, Policy and Citizens' Observatory: Migration, Digitalization, Climate", Cooperation for Voluntary Service (CVS) Bulgaria, Bulgarian Red Cross, Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR), Centre for Career Development of the NBU, Refugee Advisory Council, SAR. They told the visitors about their work in favour of migrants in Bulgaria, about their causes and

missions. The event also included an intercultural program with the participation of 40 refugee children and their families from the Registration and Reception Centre in Ovcha Kupel, who greeted and excited the guests of the biennale with musical performances in Bulgarian and Arabic.

During the reporting period, the **project "Students support the social inclusion of refugees in Sofia"** was implemented by the Multi Kulti Collective in partnership with the Association for the Development of Sofia, the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Legal Aid Centre "Voice in Bulgaria", UNHCR, the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants and the Academic Council on Refugee Affairs. The project is financed by the Sofia Municipality under the "Social Innovations" programme. Within the framework of the project, an innovative internship programme was implemented, which gave students from Sofia University, New Bulgarian University and the University of National and World Economy the opportunity to work in the field for two months as part of the teams of three organisations in Sofia. By involving the academic community (professors and students from different universities in support of integration), students had the opportunity to gain real practical experience, NGO increased their capacity, and foreigners received more support. The youth, part of the internship program, developed a communication campaign to counter prejudice and hate speech, and the lessons learned from the internships were described in special issues of the academic newsletter "Refugees: Today and Tomorrow", published by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants and UNHCR. Within the framework of the project, a Facebook group "Students in support of refugees and migrants" was created, where the academic community continues to communicate even after the end of the project.

In 2022, the presentation of the **photographic exhibition "Faces of Diversity"**, organised within the European project MATILDE<sup>19</sup> (Horizon 2020) and opened for the first time at the end of 2021 at the New Bulgarian University, continued. The exhibition presents photographs of migrants from Harmanli and the Haskovo region and ten of a total of 30 stories of foreigners from 13 countries who live, create and work in South-Eastern Bulgaria. The exhibition was presented at the opening of the MENAR Sofia Film Festival in the G8 Cultural Centre and after the round table "Local development and innovative practices of migration, mobility, integration and inclusion" in the Cultural Centre in Harmanli. On the occasion of the International Day of Migrants at the end of the year, the photographic exhibition was presented at the 9th French Language High School in Sofia, where during the opening, one of the authors of the exhibition held a talk with over 40 high school students about the stories of migrants from photographs and coverage of migration issues in the media in Bulgaria.

The **"Intercultural Gardens as Green Bridges" initiative**, which was started in 2021 in 6 schools in the town of Harmanli and in the village of Bulgarin, was continued in 2022 with a repeat visit of the CERMES and Caritas Bulgaria teams to the schools. The initiative was also held in a school in Sofia within the framework of the European project for education and refugee and migrant children REFUGE-ED, thus becoming an example of a successful transfer of good practices from one project under the EU framework program for research and innovations Horizon 2020 (MATILDE project) to another (REFUGE-ED project). The initiative "Intercultural gardens as green bridges" was presented by CERMES at a fair for the exchange of

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<sup>19</sup> <https://matilde-migration.eu/>



good practices and activities related to the integration of TCNs and rural development, which took place during the international conference "Migration and Rural Development" on the MATILDE project in Villach, Austria in November 2022.

In 2022, the **international youth story competition "Migration in my life"** was held as part of the activities of the European project MATILDE. With the assistance of teachers from the Vocational High School for Electrical Industry and Textiles in the town of Harmanli, a child from Syria, seeking protection, who was accommodated in the RRC Harmanli and is a high school student, took part in the competition.

In February 2022, Bulgarian entrepreneurs, representatives of the technological community and friends of Ukraine launched the **initiative #BG4UA "Bulgaria for Ukraine"**<sup>20</sup> in support of those fleeing the horror of war. The first activities within the initiative included the evacuation of Ukrainian citizens who chose Bulgaria as their temporary home. A platform was created that brought together 3,000 volunteers – people and organisations from all over Bulgaria who offer housing, voluntary work and basic support. A volunteer contact centre accommodates and provides assistance to Ukrainians in the first moments of their arrival in Bulgaria. The initiative grew in weeks into a large-scale organisation of thousands of volunteers, hundreds of donors, dozens of civic organisations and companies across the country.

## **7.6 PUBLICATIONS AND RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF INTEGRATION**

In 2022, the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore with the Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences published a **collection entitled "Between the Worlds: Migrants, Marginals and Social Environment"**<sup>21</sup>. The collection is the result of an international scientific conference held in Sofia on 1-2 December 2021 and includes more than 15 multidisciplinary reports by authors from different countries. The materials were organised into several chapters that analyse migration from different perspectives. Different patterns of integration and adaptation in the host societies, conditioned by the search for better educational opportunities, their high mobility profile, weak family ties and global culture are examined. The collection is available on the official integration portal of the European Commission (European Website on Integration).

In 2022, 2 issues of the **academic newsletter "Refugees: Today and Tomorrow"**<sup>22</sup>, were published. Their purpose was to provide up-to-date information on various aspects of the phenomenon of forced migration, including international refugee protection standards, information on the asylum systems in Bulgaria and Europe and integration opportunities and practices for refugees. Other topics were the political, economic and social consequences for host communities. The academic bulletin contains data and statistics, brief legal explanations of the regime of international protection, information on the activities of the institutions and non-governmental organizations that support refugees in Bulgaria, interviews with experts

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bg4ua.com>

<sup>21</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/between-worlds-migrants-margins-and-social-environment\\_en?fbclid=IwAR3pjCG0FWqcmDRZ7W5EjV-rFgnntA0ngtTDvycEfQ1ujm276wR8Liq3pRA](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/between-worlds-migrants-margins-and-social-environment_en?fbclid=IwAR3pjCG0FWqcmDRZ7W5EjV-rFgnntA0ngtTDvycEfQ1ujm276wR8Liq3pRA)

<sup>22</sup> <https://academia.bcrm-bg.org/%d0%bc%d0%b5%d1%81%d0%b5%d1%87%d0%bd%d0%b8-%d0%b1%d1%8e%d0%bb%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b8/>

on the ground, speakers, information on academic initiatives and published articles related to the topic. The newsletter is published by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants within the project "Advocacy for the Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria", supported by the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria.

In 2022, a **collection of "Good practices of cooperation for the integration of refugees in the EU"**<sup>23</sup> prepared by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants (BCRM) under a project funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was published on the website of the European Integration Website. The collection presents examples of fruitful cooperation on projects and activities for the integration of refugees in different countries of the European Union.

During the reporting period, the **article "Bulgarian migration experience: between the creation and management of crises"** with authors Assoc. Prof. Evelina Staykova and Vanina Ninova was published as part of a collection of scientific works from an international scientific conference "Crisis and conflicts – correlations and challenges", New Bulgarian University. The article presented a critical analysis of the management of migration processes in Bulgaria, defending the thesis that migration issues in the country are often politicised and instrumentalised, which creates a sense of crisis and threat to national security among Bulgarian society, without necessarily corresponding to the real characteristics of the phenomenon.

In 2022, the Multi Kulti Collective and the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants in partnership with UNHCR Bulgaria published a **"Manifesto for the Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria"**<sup>24</sup>. The manifesto is a national program document and advocacy tool that covers the key areas of refugee integration in Bulgaria. The document focuses on persons seeking and receiving international protection and is based on the understanding that integration is an investment that enables newcomers to integrate into the economic, social and cultural life of the country as soon as possible and thus be able to take care of themselves, their loved ones and to benefit the host society. The manifesto proposes to restore the previously active National Program for the Integration of Refugees in the Republic of Bulgaria, operating in the period 2005-2013, which was implemented by the SAR with state funding and was determined as a good European practice. The document was developed through a series of national round tables, expert meetings and online consultations and was prepared as part of the National Integration Assessment Mechanism (NIEM) project, co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union.

In 2022, the Multi Kulti Collective published a **study on "Hate Speech and Euroscepticism in Bulgaria"**<sup>25</sup> within the framework of the "Active European Citizens Against Hate Speech" project, funded under the "Europe for Citizens" program of the European Commission. During the year, under the project, the European comparative report "Hate, Euroscepticism and Citizenship: The Youth Connection", prepared by Prof. Anna Krasteva, was published. The research objectives focus on the analysis of hate discourses and practices in terms of definitions, European and national standards, objectives, actors, anti-discrimination policies and

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<sup>23</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/bulgaria-good-practices-cooperation-refugee-integration\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/bulgaria-good-practices-cooperation-refugee-integration_en)

<sup>24</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/manifesto-refugee-integration-bulgaria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/manifesto-refugee-integration-bulgaria_en)

<sup>25</sup> <https://multikulti.bg/bg/publications/hate-speech-and-euroscepticism-bulgaria>

good practices. The study sees civic activism as a key factor in countering hateful discourses and practices and in promoting European values of respect for differences, freedom, equality and human dignity.

A **methodological manual "How to organise a day care centre for refugee children?"**<sup>26</sup> was also published, aiming to help schools and NGOs in organising day care centres for displaced children and refugee children. The manual, published by the educational site <https://prepodavame.bg>, is based on the experience and good practices of the day care centre for refugee children from Ukraine, which has been operating in the Museum "Muzeiko" in Sofia since the spring of 2022. It gathers the experience gained over the past 11 years of "Together in an Hour" Foundation in organising summer academies for students, as well as the work in the past months during the all-day centre at "Muzeiko" for refugee children from Ukraine – part of the "Together with Ukraine" initiative of the US Embassy and Foundation "America for Bulgaria". In the handbook you can find information about the main stages in organising a centre for children, useful materials and links to other resources.

An interactive "**Booklet with MATILDE policy recommendations**"<sup>27</sup> was published on the website of the MATILDE Migration and Local Development Project, presenting the most significant challenges and key policy recommendations regarding the social and economic inclusion of third-country nationals and rural development, identified in the 10 project partner countries, one of which is Bulgaria.

Since 2022, the "**Digital Student Laboratory 2.0**" platform exists on the page of the academic portal on forced migration and refugees "Refugees: Today and Tomorrow". The laboratory was the place of publication of materials developed or translated by students specialising Arabic Studies at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" during an internship held at the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria in 2021-2022. The materials presented in three headings "Voices from the field", "Studies" and "Glossaries" can be useful both to the academic community and students, as well as to specialists working on the subject.

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<sup>26</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/bulgaria-how-organise-day-care-centre-refugee-children\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/bulgaria-how-organise-day-care-centre-refugee-children_en)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/67244765/matilde-booklet>

## 8. CITIZENSHIP AND STATELESSNESS

### 8.1 GRANTING CITIZENSHIP - STATISTICS AND TRENDS

In 2022, the Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria, in exercise of the powers conferred on them by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, issued **137 decrees on changes in Bulgarian citizenship to 10,330 persons**, as follows<sup>28</sup>:

- 73 decrees for acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship on the grounds of Bulgarian origin, parent Bulgarian citizen, general naturalisation, on the grounds of Article 16 of the Law on the Bulgarian citizenship for 7,410 persons;
- 43 decrees for restoration of Bulgarian citizenship for 2,660 persons;
- 17 decrees on exemption from Bulgarian citizenship for 247 persons;
- 4 decrees on revocation of naturalisation for 13 persons.

The citizens who predominated were originating from the Republic of North Macedonia - 1,992 persons, Ukraine - 1,639 persons, the Republic of Turkey - 1,290 persons, the Republic of Serbia - 556 persons, the Republic of Albania - 517 persons, the Republic of Moldova - 476 persons, the Russian Federation - 356 persons, the State of Israel - 202 persons, the Syrian Arab Republic - 86 persons. Bulgarian citizenship has also been granted to 269 persons from 55 other countries. Bulgarian citizenship was granted to 27 stateless persons.

There has been a **51% decrease in the number of persons acquiring Bulgarian citizenship** compared to 2021, when 15,171 persons acquired Bulgarian citizenship.

During the reporting period, **3,520 persons acquired Bulgarian citizenship** on the grounds of **Bulgarian origin**.

In 2022, the number of **persons who acquired Bulgarian citizenship** on the basis of a **Bulgarian citizen parent or under the conditions of full adoption** is **3,396**.

In the reporting period, the number of **persons who acquired Bulgarian citizenship by naturalisation** on the above grounds amounted to **486**.

**8 persons acquired Bulgarian citizenship due to the interest of the Republic of Bulgaria in their naturalization for the development of Bulgarian sports.**

During the reporting period, the number of persons for whom decrees were issued to **restore Bulgarian citizenship** was **2,660**.

The number of persons **released from Bulgarian citizenship** during the reporting period was **247**. This category includes Bulgarian citizens who have permanently settled on the territory of another country and have requested to acquire its citizenship. It is a question of the domestic legislation of the country concerned as regards the rules for naturalisation of applicants and tolerance of dual/multiple citizenship. During the reporting period, persons requested exemption from Bulgarian citizenship in order to acquire citizenship of: Australia, the Republic of Austria, the Republic of Belarus, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Kingdom of Spain, the Kingdom of the Netherlands,

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<sup>28</sup> Report on the activities of the Commission on Bulgarian Citizenship in the period 1 January - 21 December, 2022 <https://www.president.bg/docs/1674645834.pdf>

the Republic of Poland, the Russian Federation, the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Singapore, the Republic of Slovenia, the United States of America, the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Croatia.

**4 decrees** have been issued **revoking the naturalisation of 13 persons**. For each of them, the revocation was proposed by the Minister of Justice because the Citizenship Committee found concealed information or facts which, if known, would have prevented the persons from obtaining a decree of Bulgarian citizenship. Reasons for revocation: due to legal violations with bans on entry and residence in the Schengen area; concealed facts and data on judicial and criminal records; valid convictions for intentional crimes of a general nature in the country of origin or in a Schengen country; persons declared wanted by Interpol; use of forged/false documents to certify the existence of a Bulgarian ascendant; failure to maintain the investments that became the basis for acquiring Bulgarian citizenship for at least a two-year period from the date of naturalisation.

During the reporting period, the Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria refused to issue decrees for change of citizenship to a total of 1,908 persons.

Out of the total number of refusals, the Vice President refused to issue a decree granting Bulgarian citizenship to 1,873 persons. 1,855 persons were refused citizenship on the proposal of the Minister of Justice. 18 persons have been refused Bulgarian citizenship by decision of the Vice President due to: lack of categorical evidence of Bulgarian descent (§ 2, para. 1 of the Supplementary Provisions of the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship (LBC)); the presence of data preventing naturalisation - in view of the behaviour of the persons there are serious reasons to believe that they pose a threat to national security, public order, morals and/or health; insufficient data proving the maintenance of investments in the amount specified in Art. 12a and Art. 14a of the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship (amended).

During the reporting period, on the proposal of the Minister of Justice, the Vice President **refused to restore the Bulgarian citizenship of 34 persons**.

In 2022, on the proposal of the Minister of Justice, the Vice President **refused to release 1 person from Bulgarian citizenship**.

## **8.2 LEGISLATIVE CHANGES**

On 04.04.2022, a **Law on Amendments to the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship was adopted**<sup>29</sup> (promulgated in the State Gazette, No. 26 of 01.04.2022), which completely repeals the provisions of Article 12a and Article 14a of the Law. The main motive for the amendment is the need to take action to eliminate the possibility of "investment" citizenship or the so-called "golden passports", which undermine the essence of EU citizenship, as well as the implementation of greater control in obtaining Bulgarian citizenship.

The amendment of the Law has introduced significant changes related to investment-based citizenship, such as the removal of the possibility to acquire citizenship on the basis of investment. By § 7 of the Transitional and Final Provisions of the Law on the Amendment of the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship, the legislator provided for the

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<sup>29</sup> Law on Bulgarian Citizenship <https://justice.government.bg/home/normdoc/2134446592>

termination of proceedings pending before the entry into force of this Law under the repealed Articles 12a and 14a. In the period 01.01. – 03.04.2022, the Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria has not signed a decree granting Bulgarian citizenship to any person who applied for naturalisation on any of the mentioned and repealed grounds.

The amendments to the law have also introduced checks on all persons who have acquired Bulgarian citizenship by naturalisation pursuant to Article 14a of the LBC after the expiration of the minimum period of naturalisation during which they are obliged to maintain the investment, respectively initiating proceedings for the revocation of naturalisation in the presence of the legal prerequisites.

The Ministry of Justice, through coordinated actions with the competent authorities - the Bulgarian Investment Agency and the State Agency for National Security, carries out follow-up control and takes the actions provided for in the law for the revocation of naturalisation in cases where the investments have not been maintained during the minimum period required by law.

Another objective is to strengthen the control of the Citizenship Committee of the Ministry of Justice over the documents submitted by the applicants, by assigning verifications of their truth and authenticity through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior.

### **8.3 DETERMINATION OF STATELESSNESS, STATUS AND RIGHTS**

In 2016, the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria (LFRB) introduced the possibility of granting the status of "stateless person", in accordance with the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

In 2022, **27 stateless persons were granted Bulgarian citizenship.**

# 9. BORDERS, VISA AND SCHENGEN

## 9.1. LEGISLATIVE CHANGES AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

On 12 September 2022, the Republic of Bulgaria adopted directly the Council Decision (EU) 2022/1500 on the suspension in whole of the application of the Agreement between the European Community and the Russian Federation on the facilitation of the issuance of visas to the citizens of the European Union and the Russian Federation. The decision suspends the bilateral treaty between Bulgaria and the Russian Federation, which provides for citizens of both countries who hold valid diplomatic and service passports have the right to enter, exit, transit and temporarily reside in the territory of the other contracting party without a visa for up to 90 days during any one period of 180 days from the date of first entry.

In 2022 the competent authorities amended Instruction No 81213-1244 of 2015 on the surveillance of the state border of the Republic of Bulgaria, specific security activities for participation in measures to achieve airport security in public areas within the perimeter of airports and the implementation of compensatory measures. The change opened up the possibility of using additional forces contributing to optimal border surveillance. The Instruction provides for officers of the General Directorate of Border Police from other fields of activity may carry out tasks to counter illegal migration across the state border.

In the period January - April 2022, there was an increased number of persons wishing to enter the territory of Bulgaria and the EU. The Ministry of Interior's services prevented 33,860 attempts to enter Bulgaria illegally from the border with Turkey, a fourfold increase compared to the same period last year. As a result, **a strategic document, the Action Plan for an Emergency Situation as a result of the increased migratory pressure at the border between Bulgaria and the Republic of Turkey, has been adopted. According to this document, an emergency situation is present** "In case of illegal crossing of the state border of more than 250-300 persons per day and filling the capacity of the Migration Directorate above 70%".

The plan sets out 5 objectives:

- Establishing optimal organisation, coordination and interaction of the competent state authorities in preventing risks due to increased migration pressure.
- Minimising the number of migrants illegally crossing the state border of the Republic of Bulgaria.
- Building and maintaining additional capacity for the reception and accommodation of irregular border crossers, if necessary.
- Establishing an organisation to decide, as soon as possible, on applications for international protection under the Law on Asylum and Refugee.
- Implementing the procedures for the return to the country of origin, country of transit, or third country of illegally staying foreigners, in accordance with the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Action Plan for an Emergency Situation due to Increased Migration Pressure at the Border of the Republic of Bulgaria with the Republic of Turkey - <https://shorturl.at/pX358>



As of 27 August 2022, the participation of servicemen in the surveillance of the Bulgarian-Turkish border has progressively increased.

In line with the technical and operational objectives of the integrated management of the European borders in 2022, Bulgaria has been implementing the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management in the Republic of Bulgaria 2020-2025. The key points of the strategy are: effective border control; successful cooperation with third countries to reduce migration pressure and effective return of persons; modernisation of border surveillance systems; and combating cross-border crime.

**The Decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria No. 944 of 24 November 2022 approved the 2022 Plan for the implementation of the objectives of the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management in the Republic of Bulgaria 2020-2025, adopted by Decision No. 792 of the Council of Ministers of 2020.**

The strategy policy document foresees a set of measures covering 14 areas: Border control, Search and rescue operations, Risk analysis, Cooperation between Member States supported and coordinated by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Inter-agency cooperation, Cooperation with third countries, Technical and operational measures in the Schengen area, Return of third-country nationals in relation to return decisions issued by a Member State, Use of advanced technologies, Quality control mechanism, Solidarity mechanism and European funding instruments, Fundamental rights, Education and training, Research and innovation.

The plan introduces additional officers and mixed patrols to carry out systematic and comprehensive control along the state border.

Among the most important strategic objectives is to increase border crossing points (BCP) staff and to provide the required number of trained border police officers to carry out swift border controls. This requires the deployment of 240 additional police officers for border controls.

Another priority set out in the Plan is to upgrade and modernise the technical capacity to carry out border surveillance and effectively manage migration flows with permanent readiness in case of mass influx of migrants. Through a system of drone and unmanned aerial vehicles, which operate mainly on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, additional border control is implemented. Border surveillance is carried out by means of modern technical equipment, integrated and automated systems, portable and mobile systems that allow surveillance also at night. The established EU Entry/Exit Reporting System at BCPs centralises data and increases the efficiency of operations.

In December 2022, the project "Upgrading, maintenance, repair and modernisation of electronic counters installed at the Regional Directorate of Border Police "Airports" was successfully completed. The project has helped to upgrade and renovate 4 electronic counters, as well as install 4 new electronic counters at Terminal 1 of Sofia Airport BCP. At Varna Airport and Burgas Airport, the software of 12 electronic counters was upgraded and 12 electronic counters were made fully operational and functional. It is planned to extend the use of the biometric data collection system and electronic counters for automated border control to the land borders of the country. The plan foresees actions for the rapid rehabilitation of roads in the border area of the Bulgarian-Turkish border to ensure the mobility of border patrols, the effective operation of the joint contact centre at the Capitan Andreevo BCP.



During the past year, the operations carried out by the National Contact Point established within the General Directorate of Border Police were maintained. It coordinates and exchanges information following the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on European Border and Coast Guard.

In 2022, the development of an automated information system – the case management system – was completed. Its aim is to meet Schengen requirements for registering irregular migrants, issuing 'return' and 'no-entry' decisions on the territory of EU Member States and the Schengen area (Regulation 2018/1860, Regulation 2018/1861) and collecting photographic and fingerprint data. The system aims to make it possible for the structures of the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for Refugees to track foreigners from the moment of their initial registration until their removal from EU territory.

## **9.2 OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION AT THE BULGARIAN BORDERS**

In 2022, in order to curb illegal migration, the Bulgarian authority seeks, on the one hand, to deter it at its borders and on the other hand through various operations within the country. An important fact is that Bulgaria is an external border of the EU, which requires the implementation of specific measures in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code to secure and improve the control of the external borders of the EU by establishing an EU Entry/Exit system at BCPs. In 2022, the Bulgarian authorities concentrated efforts on countering illegal migration at the Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Greek borders. Actions aimed at enhancing technical capacity continued. Cooperation in the conduct of joint operations coordinated by the Frontex Agency has been successful.

**In 2022, an increase of 1.6 times is noted in the total number of third-country nationals apprehended at the entry and exit points of the state border and found to be illegally staying in the interior of the country. 16 767 is the number of third-country nationals detained in 2022. Detention by location is distributed as follows:**

- 2,298 persons at the state border entrance
- 2,377 persons at the exit without registration
- 12,092 persons caught illegally staying in the interior of the country

In 2022, 7953 refusals of entry were issued to third-country nationals who did not meet the Schengen criteria for entry to the EU<sup>31</sup>. Of these, citizens of Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, North Macedonia predominate.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Article 6 of the Schengen Borders Code

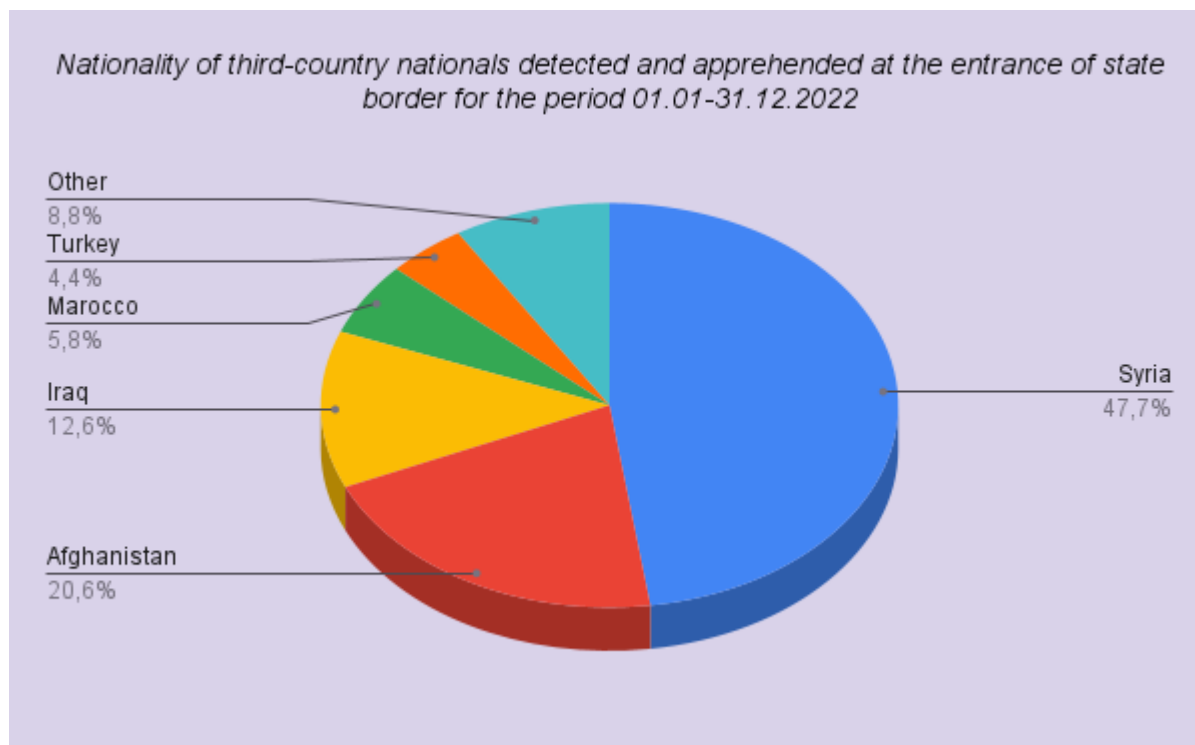
<sup>32</sup>Ministry of Interior, REPORT on the implementation of the programme budget of the Ministry of Interior in 2022

<https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotchetnost/%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0->

The largest number of attempts of illegal crossing of the state border by third-country nationals were detected at the Bulgarian-Serbian border, where 3,841 persons were detained. In 2022, 2,100 persons were apprehended at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. The most peaceful in terms of regulated entry and exit is the border between Bulgaria and North Macedonia – only 12 detentions for the whole year.

Of those apprehended at the entrance to the state border, persons from Syria (47.7%) and Afghanistan (20.06%) predominate.

Compared to the previous year, detentions at the entrance increased by 65.8%.

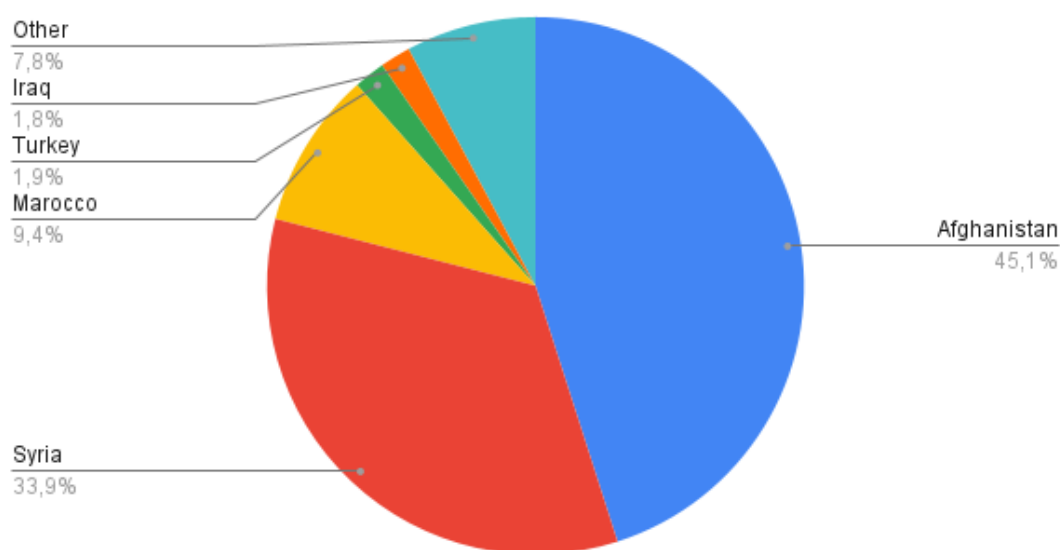


**4,339 persons were apprehended at the exit of the state border, among which 3,786 were apprehended at the green border and 554 at the BCP. In this direction, an increase of more than 50% is reported in 2022 compared to 2021 (1,097 persons apprehended).**

Dynamics are also reported at the Bulgarian-Romanian border, where a total of 498 persons were detained last year. According to the data of the Ministry of Interior, the national authorities have detected at the exit of the state border the largest number of citizens from Afghanistan. They are followed by citizens of Syria, Morocco, Turkey, and Iraq. The following table reflects the percentage of the nationality of those detected and apprehended at the exit of the state border of the third-country nationals for the period 01.01 - 31.12.2022:

[%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82/1300-bu-3-122022.pdf?sfvrsn=638f7eeb\\_0](#)

*Nationality of third-country nationals detected and apprehended at the exit of the state border in 2022*



### 9.3. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

**In 2022, effective cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) on countering irregular migration and securing borders was strengthened. Joint action and cooperation between the Bulgarian border authorities and Frontex is also key to strengthening the capacity and proper functioning of the asylum system.** Ensuring a well-functioning European border and coast guard is a common goal for the country and for the EU. Bulgaria actively supports Frontex missions, in 2022 the country has provided a border vessel with over 35 border guards for the purpose of the European agency in Greece. On the other hand, in the past year, Bulgaria has benefited from the resources provided by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency to secure the country's borders. The contingency plan highlights the need to increase the number of staff of the "National Contact Point with Frontex" in relation to the upcoming increase in workload and 24/7 working hours. The opinion on this need is based on an analysis carried out to determine the number of staff required to carry out tasks arising from cooperation with Frontex.

The Bulgarian State has participated in the EU external land **border operation 'TERRA 2022'**, launched in 2022. It involved 12 EU Member States and covers 62 border crossing points. In Bulgaria, it has been implemented at the Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Serbian borders, as well as at the border with the Republic of North Macedonia. Within the framework of the initiative, the Bulgarian border services have increased their skills in border checks, detection of false documents, gathering information on human smuggling networks and migration phenomena and identifying vulnerable groups. To support these activities, Frontex has provided patrol vehicles and thermal imaging vehicles to support their work.

**In the past year, representatives of the Bulgarian competent authorities have taken part in one more joint operation "Focal Points – Air Borders 2022".** In December 2022, Bulgaria, together with Romania, co-hosted a multifunctional maritime operation in the Black Sea. The operation aimed at several objectives, from increasing the effectiveness of border control, including combating cross-border crime, saving lives at sea to protecting the environment in the Western Black Sea, preventing illegal fishing, and monitoring borders.

#### **9.4. IMPROVING TECHNICAL CAPACITY AND UPGRADING SURVEILLANCE AND SECURITY SYSTEMS**

In 2022, the General Directorate of Border Police successfully finalised several projects to improve the technical capacity and upgrade the surveillance and security systems. Major projects include those for "Ongoing maintenance and upgrading of buildings and premises for border control", "Supply of software and hardware for data and document backup" and a project for "Supply of computer equipment and other equipment/provision for them". Under the latter, Bulgaria is provided with active network devices (media-converters); warranty support for specialised peripherals (document scanners) for first and second line border control workstations; communication and other equipment that will support border management and border control".

# 10. IRREGULAR MIGRATION INCLUDING MIGRANT SMUGGLING

## 10.1 ILLEGAL STAY IN THE COUNTRY

As a result of the intensification of migration processes in the previous year, 34 specialised police operations on illegal migration were carried out. The Bulgarian competent institutions, represented by the General Directorate Combating Organised Crime, have participated in 2 national specialised police operations to counter crime. The activities of 7 organised criminal groups were suppressed. 95 persons were detained, of whom 46 were charged with involvement in illegal migration activities. An additional 519 irregular migrants were detained.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Ministry of Interior and as a result of the expansion of patrol and post activities and the increase in police operations in the interior of the country, 12,092 persons were found to be in illegal stay, mostly in the second half of 2022. The increase was 1.5 times compared to 2021. The highest figures were recorded in the spring period in April and in August – September. In the first half of the year, the highest number of irregular stay cases was recorded for nationals from Afghanistan, but in the second half of 2022, the number of cases from Syria overtakes. Of those found to be illegally staying inside the country, persons from Afghanistan were 50.3% of the total number, and from Syria – 35%.

The most intense migration waves during the year, in the spring and at the end of the summer season, reflected in the number of persons accommodated in Special Homes for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners at the Migration Directorate in Sofia and Lyubimets.

At the end of April 2022, the occupancy rate reached 130%, and in the period August-September between 82 and 160%. In this regard, 308 additional places have been provided.

By the end of 2022, 704 persons (compared to 728 last year) from Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco and other nationalities have been accommodated. With a capacity of 1,060 places, 66% occupancy has been reached.

During the period 01.01 – 30.04.2022, 4,214 third-country nationals were found illegally staying on the territory of the country, their number being 1,209 in April only. After the activation of the Action Plan at the end of April 2022, a decrease in the

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<sup>33</sup>Ministry of Interior, REPORT on the implementation of the programme budget of the Ministry of Interior in 2022

[https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotcheknost/%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82/1300-bu-3-122022.pdf?sfvrsn=638f7eeb\\_0](https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotcheknost/%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82/1300-bu-3-122022.pdf?sfvrsn=638f7eeb_0)

number of detained persons was recorded in the following three months: 213 in May, 663 in June and 653 in July. In August and September, however, the numbers reached a record high of 1,505 and 1,878 respectively.

## **10.2. COUNTERING MIGRANT SMUGGLING**

A serious concern is the safety of asylum seekers accommodated in reception centres in the country, as they are at risk from traffickers. In August 2022, NGOs requested specific measures to ensure personal safety in reception centres. As a result, SAR has submitted several requests to the Ministry of Interior to provide police security in exchange for private security at reception centres. Currently, police security is provided only at the largest reception centre in Harmanli.<sup>34</sup>

According to data published for 2022, 341 persons were held criminally responsible for migrant smuggling, which is an increase by 78% compared to the previous year. In this regard, an additional 1,260 border police officers were to be recruited and cooperation with the Ministry of Defence and the Turkish counterpart has continued.

In Bulgaria, as a result of increased control by the authorities in charge and through active media coverage, a number of operations to apprehend migrant smugglers were announced.

In 2022, the Directorate General of Border Police continued to implement activities to counter migrant smuggling. There are many examples in this respect – since the beginning of the year, incidents with captured migrant smugglers, as well as police actions in the areas of Burgas, Malko Tarnovo, Plovdiv, Haskovo, Montana, Kostinbrod have been reported.

- The most serious and tragic incident related to the smuggling of migrants and counteraction is from August, when a group of three Syrian citizens involved in an organized group rammed a passenger bus into the patrolling team of the Burgas police. As a consequence, the two uniformed men lost their lives.
- In October, Bulgarian and Iraqi nationals were detained on charges of migrant smuggling.
- In December 2022, a large-scale raid by the General Directorate Combating Organized Crime detained about 10 people part of a "serious organised crime group" for smuggling.

According to the Ministry of Interior, most of the detainees were reportedly charged under the provisions of the Penal Code for smuggling.

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<sup>34</sup> Asylum Information Database, Country Report: Bulgaria 2022, [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG\\_2022update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG_2022update.pdf)

### **10.3 DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THE IDENTIFICATION OF FRAUDULENT TRAVEL DOCUMENTS**

In 2022, there was an active inter-institutional cooperation in the common process of identification and issuance of travel documents to irregularly staying third-country nationals.

In 2022, one of the most spectacular operations to apprehend forgers of travel and identity documents was related to third-country nationals and their issuance of fake "diplomatic" passports by a Bulgarian citizen in the town of Pomorie.

# 11. TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

## 11.1. GENERAL CONTEXT

Due to its strategic location, Bulgaria is one of the countries through which half of the European corridors pass. Bulgaria is on a major route for migrants from the Middle East and Afghanistan who want to enter Europe from Turkey. Most of them use Bulgaria as a transit corridor on their way to the Western Europe. Asylum seekers and migrants from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, who pass through Bulgaria on their way to Western Europe, are particularly vulnerable from this point of view, as are Ukrainian refugees, mainly women and children, seeking asylum in Bulgaria.

Consistency and intensity of the efforts of the Bulgarian law enforcement authorities are needed to reduce the number of trafficking crimes in the country. During a visit to Bulgaria by representatives and the Special Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), emphasis was placed on the need for Bulgaria to adopt a national strategy to combat trafficking in human beings and to open the position of Executive Secretary of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

## 11.2. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

In 2022, there are no significant developments in trafficking policies and legislation.

The State budget allocated in 2022 for the activities of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings is BGN 461 600<sup>35</sup>. However the Expert Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings recommends a more appropriate allocation of funds in line with actual needs, ensuring sustainable measures to combat trafficking in human beings and independence of actions from external funding<sup>36</sup>. The issue of compensation for victims of traffickers is also on the agenda in 2022, as the mechanism for its use goes through a cumbersome procedure and victims are rarely fully compensated.

## 11.3. NATIONAL STRATEGIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In 2022 out of a total of 132 persons identified as victims of trafficking, 12 are third-country nationals (8 nationals of Ukraine, 3 nationals of Syria and 1 national of the Philippines).

According to the Ministry of Interior, 17,000 BGN, documents related to criminal activities, recording and filming devices were seized. 4 criminal cases have been opened. 8 specialized police operations were conducted and 5 organised crime groups were neutralized, including 4 organised crime groups for trafficking in human beings

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<sup>35</sup> <https://antitraffic.government.bg/uploads/Files/Budjet2022NCCTHB.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> GRETA, Evaluation Report, Bulgaria <https://rm.coe.int/greta-evaluation-report-on-the-implementation-of-the-council-of-europe/1680a249f9>



for sexual exploitation and 1 organised crime group for trafficking in human beings for the purpose of taking bodily fluid – blood. <sup>37</sup>

**On 29 September 2022, the National Programme for the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Human Beings and Protection of Victims for 2022 and the National Programme for the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Human Beings and Protection of Victims for 2023 were adopted.**

The main objective of the National Programme for Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Human Beings and Protection of Victims for 2022 is to develop and upgrade the capacity of experts in the field of combating trafficking in human beings and protection of victims. It is implemented through the production of specialised training materials, a trainers' guide and training workshops to enhance the capacity of:

- Prosecutors and investigative authorities, with a focus on ensuring a victim-centred approach to the investigation and prosecution process.
- Law enforcement representatives, with a focus on different modalities and good practices in the investigation of trafficking in human beings.
- Professionals working in shelters to receive training on how to use the Integrated Database.
- Pedagogical specialists on the topic of "Prevention of trafficking in human beings".
- Professionals to identify and support victims of gender-based violence, including trafficking in human beings, in reception centres

Improving cross-border cooperation between Bulgarian and Greek police authorities and other specialists in the fight against trafficking in human beings is a priority, in particular between Bulgarian and Greek police authorities in the areas around the northern border of Greece (Alexandroupolis, Komotini and Thessaloniki). In 2022, bilateral cooperation in the fight against trafficking in human beings and the protection of victims between Bulgaria and Germany was successful. An international project ERADICATING aimed at enhancing the capacity of law enforcement authorities in Bulgaria, Greece and Germany in the investigation of trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of children, as well as increased public awareness of the issues, through the production of materials, training, simulation discussions and publications on a specialized website, was successfully implemented.

A number of training workshops, information sessions and public discussions on the prevention of trafficking in persons have been carried out in the course of 2022. The training sessions were organized by the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in partnership with local structures, international organizations such as IOM, UNHCR, Caritas, UNICEF and Bulgarian Red Cross.

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<sup>37</sup>Ministry of Interior, REPORT on the implementation of the programme budget of the Ministry of Interior in 2022

[https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotchetnost/%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82/1300-bu-3-122022.pdf?sfvrsn=638f7eeb\\_0](https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotchetnost/%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82/1300-bu-3-122022.pdf?sfvrsn=638f7eeb_0)

# 12. RETURN AND READMISSION

## 12.1 OVERVIEW

An effective return policy that fully respects the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the persons concerned is an integral part of an overall migration and asylum policy. The EU's common rules on return, as described in Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, provide for clear, transparent and fair treatment of migrants in an irregular situation, while respecting their rights and freedoms.

An important element of the common EU return system is voluntary return, which, together with effective reintegration measures, offers a humane, effective and sustainable return of irregular migrants. An EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, which implements the Pact on Migration and Asylum Seeking, is presented in the Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 27.4.2021. The strategy aims to increase the number of voluntary returns and improve the quality of support provided to returnees. In doing so, it improves the overall effectiveness of the EU return system.

The return policy of the Republic of Bulgaria shall be conducted in compliance with the norms established by EU and international law, aiming at full respect for the human rights and dignity of those to be returned, as well as the principle of "non refoulement".

Return is either forced or voluntary, and the policy and legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria give priority to voluntary return.

## 12.2 FORCED AND VOLUNTARY RETURN OF THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS RESIDING ILLEGALLY ON THE TERRITORY OF THE COUNTRY

In 2022, a total of **583 third-country nationals were returned**, distributed as follows<sup>38</sup>:

- 141 were forced returned;
- 329 were returned under readmission agreements;
- 57 with imposed administrative measures have voluntarily left the country by their own means;
- 37 were returned with the assistance of the Migration Directorate under assisted voluntary return programmes;
- 19 without a compulsory administrative measure left the country voluntarily.

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<sup>38</sup> Monthly information on the migration situation in the Republic of Bulgaria for December 2022, Ministry of Interior [https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotchetnost/spravka\\_december\\_2022\\_internet.pdf?sfvrsn=3ba46f8a\\_2](https://www.mvr.bg/docs/default-source/planiraneotchetnost/spravka_december_2022_internet.pdf?sfvrsn=3ba46f8a_2)

Among the returned third-country nationals, the majority are from Turkey –35%, Iraq – 11.7% and Morocco – 7.9%.

There were 71 third-country nationals transferred to other EU Member States under readmission procedures pursuant to Regulation 604/2013 EC (the Dublin Regulation).

### **12.3 ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN**

In 2022, the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior became part of the RIAT reintegration assistance platform of Frontex. Frontex uses the RIAT, which is a reintegration assistance tool developed by the European Commission to ensure proper handling of administrative cases. This digital tool simplifies and standardises the exchange of information on the reintegration process to the best benefit of returnees, reintegration partners and return counsellors.

### **12.4 REINTEGRATION MEASURES**

Since October 2022, the Migration Directorate with the Ministry of Interior, in its capacity as a national authority with powers to carry out forced returns of third-country nationals and to support voluntary returns, started participating in the **Frontex Joint Reintegration Services programme**. This is a newly developed project/application of the Agency for direct access of Member States to programmes for the reintegration of third-country nationals. Since the beginning of the programme in October until the end of the year, 10 third-country nationals expressed a willingness to benefit from the assistance (5 Moroccan nationals, 3 Egyptian nationals and 2 Iraqi nationals).

In 2022, IOM Bulgaria carried out a number of activities in support of voluntary return and reintegration aimed at third-country nationals, including: provision of individual consultations regarding the possibilities of voluntary return; provision of effective assistance to migrants, ensuring their safe and dignified return; assistance and coordination, in obtaining the necessary travel documents and procedures for leaving the country, with the relevant diplomatic missions and representatives of the Migration Directorate, the State Agency for Refugees, the General Directorate of Border Police; provision of medical assistance and/or pre-departure examinations of vulnerable persons and conduct of RT PCR COVID-19 tests; provision of assistance by IOM officials upon departure, during transit and upon arrival in the country of origin and assistance with reintegration and monitoring of the implemented reintegration programs.

In 2022, **effective voluntary returns of 42 third-country nationals** to the following countries of origin were carried out: Iraq - 16, including 1 vulnerable person; Morocco - 7; Iran - 4; Algeria - 3; Tunisia - 3; Pakistan - 2; Côte d'Ivoire - 2, and Dominican Republic, Russia, Guinea, Congo and Cameroon - 1 person each. Within the framework of the activities of the "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme" (AVRR), 19 reintegration packages have also been prepared for nationals of Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Togo, Algeria, Congo and Dominican Republic.

## **15.5 COOPERATION WITH THIRD COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN AND TRANSIT COUNTRIES IN RETURN AND REINTEGRATION MANAGEMENT**

In 2022, IOM Bulgaria implemented a project aimed at strengthening capacity and improving cooperation with other countries in the field of voluntary return and reintegration. Within the framework of the project, IOM Bulgaria organised a visit to Mongolia with the participation of representatives of the national authorities in the field of migration. During the visit, key topics in the field of voluntary return and reintegration of voluntary returnees were discussed.