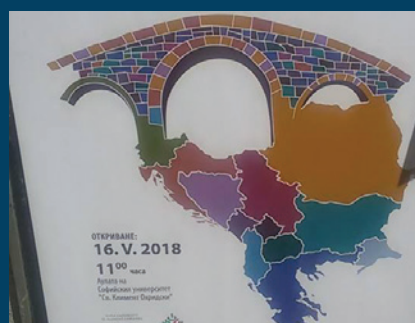


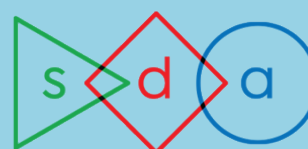
CITY INTEGRATION AUDIT REPORT FOR SOFIA, BULGARIA

Integration of Third Country Nationals through Urban Partnerships - INTEGRA



This project is funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

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**Integration of Third Country Nationals through
Urban Partnerships - INTEGRA**

City Integration Audit Report for Sofia, Bulgaria

October 2018

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City integration Audit Report for Sofia, Bulgaria

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Executive Summary

This report presents the main findings, conclusions and recommendations related to the current state of integration of third country nationals (TCN) in the city of Sofia, carried out within the INTEGRA project in the period May-August, 2018. The report comprises the results of desk research, focus groups, and two city audits: city walks with checklists and a *photovoice* activity, which aimed to assess the city's integration efforts in the following four main areas:

- City Vision and Services;
- Civic Participation and Social Inclusion of TCN and Migrant Communities;
- Urban Environment and Safety;
- Attitudes towards TCN and Migrants.

Main findings and conclusions:

1. Upward trend of immigration to Bulgaria. As the country continues to develop as a member state of the EU, it is beginning to turn from an emigrant country to an immigrant country, a trend consistent with the dynamics of the migrant and refugee crisis to Europe that started in 2015. Observable is a slight increase in foreign nationals' interest in studying and working here. Much of this interest flows into Sofia, as the largest metropolitan city. In this context, Sofia in particular is only now beginning to assess and experience the need for an approach to integration. Sofia is a historically rich city with quarters representing various ethnicities, but is a good example of coexisting cultures, religions, and ethnicities.

Sofia's immigration profile coincides to a large extent with that of Bulgaria with small exceptions, due to the city's position as a political, economic, social and cultural center. This is representative also for the dynamics and diversity of the internal migrant flows in the country, as a result of which Sofia is becoming a mega polis attracting more and more people from the inside of the country who want to study, work, and live here.

2. Statistical information about TCN. There is no dedicated collection of statistics on TCN in the Municipality. On a national level, the data is not centralized, with different aspects (e.g. TCN population, TCN by type of employment, TCN crime data, number of residence and work permits issued to TCN, etc.) distributed across agencies. This is a serious impediment in planning public expenditures for integration in the short- and long-term perspective. The top five countries of origin of TCN permanent residents in Bulgaria and the metropolitan area are, in descending order, Russia, Ukraine, Macedonia, Turkey, and Moldova – all nations which share to a significant degree cultural and ethnic characteristics with Bulgaria. TCN from these societies are likely to be familiar with much of the host context and are unlikely to experience a significant cultural adjustment as they integrate. Well-established minority communities include the Armenian, Syrian, Palestinian, Russian, Vietnamese. Historical diasporas, e.g. Armenian, Jewish, are well-integrated and can be considered part of the cultural and religious identity of the city and the nation.

Considering information support, further action needs to be taken to provide migration policy with comparable statistical data, analyses, studies, public opinion surveys, etc.

3. Growing need for (highly) skilled workforce. The demographic picture of Bulgaria, similar to that in Europe, reveals population ageing trends and out-migration. In an economic aspect this means labor force decrease which must be offset by attracting back Bulgarian diaspora and importing labor from third countries both for high skilled positions and for

seasonal work. As a major economic hub, Sofia needs to put in place strategic and institutional mechanisms in order to succeed in transforming migration and mobility into positive factors for development in demographic and economic terms.

4. City vision and services. Sofia does not have a dedicated strategic document for TCN integration and provision of relevant services; this is partially due to the predominantly centralized approach of handling migration and integration issues at national level. Isolated measures for migrants can be found in various other municipal documents (on education, social services, urban safety and security, etc.) Bulgarian law and the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2015 – 2020)¹ have clear provisions with regard to the integration process in all of its components (legal information, social services, housing, education, etc., vested in the State Agency for Refugees). There are no specific provisions concerning third country nationals with regard to information services, social and health services, education, etc. The lack of strategic vision about the model of integration with tailored measures directed at TCN groups and which is incorporated within long-term city development strategies is a major deficit (and a main recommendation for improvement) identified in the research and focus groups.

5. Institutional framework: There is no specialized unit in Sofia municipality dealing with the integration of migrants at a local level and the design, implementation, and monitoring of related services (information, education, employment, health care, housing, etc.) Should the administration introduce such a unit, it would need to focus on reconciling national policies and local approaches to integration, making sure, on the other hand, that policies, structures and resources to facilitate integration are mainstreamed with respective EU policies on migration and integration.

6. Attitudes towards TCN and migrants. Institutional hurdles to integration are additionally hampered by a conservative public response to foreigners and migrants, ranging from outright racism to positive apathy. The existing oases of exchange are, likewise the primary routes for TCN integration, typically private initiatives (often supported by the municipality through funding of NGOs). Thus far, the city has not commissioned any public opinion surveys regarding the citizens' attitudes to TCN or migrants. One recommendation from the focus groups urges the municipal administration initiate a representative poll in order to introduce evidence-based, sustainable and result-oriented integration policies.

7. Civic participation of TCN. The majority of the activities for social and cultural participation TCN is carried out by NGOs. One positive aspect of this is that municipal strategies and action plans place special importance on cooperation and partnerships with NGOs. This is also true for the national integration governance model which leaves much of the ground work with migrants and refugees in the hands and the initiative of NGOs, TCN contacts, universities, and private consulting. The issue is much more visible in Sofia insofar as the national institutions are located in the capital. Therefore, one recommendation is to establish an integration consultative body at municipal level with representation of TCN and migrants communities – working in close collaboration with the National Council for Migration and Integration, TCN organizations, migrants communities, academia, NGOs.

8. Urban environment and safety. Sofia remains a safe city for all of its residents, despite isolated incidents involving refugees and migrants. However, in a time when Bulgaria is actively seeking join Schengen, the capital city must put strong emphasis on security, fighting unregulated migration and the prevention of human trafficking in its long-term integration strategies.

1 Bulgaria, Национална стратегия в областта на миграцията, убежището и интеграцията (2015 - 2020), available at: <http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=963>, accessed on 18 September 2018

9. Public awareness of the migration and integration policy and measures. Participants in the focus groups unanimously named the lack of a communication strategy and visibility of the city's work on integration as a major area in need of improvement. Publishing migration situation reports, public discussions on legislative amendments, organizing migration policy forums, joint initiatives with NGOs are some of the recommendations made.

In conclusion, the findings of the desk research and focus groups indicate that Sofia has a long way to go to develop modern, evidence-based and well-resourced policies and action plans for migrant integration. This report recommends that the city administration formulated and carry forward a pro-active policy for transforming Sofia into a center attractive for citizens of third countries, foreign investors, entrepreneurs, and utilizing their potential for the betterment of the capital. In this respect, the project INTEGRA offers a unique opportunity for internationalization of the city's efforts and learning valuable lessons from the partnering cities.

Introduction

This report reflects the results of the city audit that has been carried out in Sofia as part the project INTEGRA - *Integration of Third Country Nationals through Urban Partnerships*, whose overall purpose is to improve the process of long-term integration of TCN (third country nationals) in selected cities in Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Slovakia and the Czech Republic through city-to-city knowledge and experience sharing. The project goal is to promote deeper mutual understanding between migrant communities and the host societies against the rising political discourse of securitization, which paints migrants and refugees as a major security threat in Europe.

To achieve this goal, the INTEGRA partners have developed, tested and promoted new models and tools for participatory assessment of city integration performance, in order to support and improve city integration policies. The new models and tools seek to facilitate and support cooperation between stakeholders, experts, city administrations and partner countries. In this way the project responds to the challenges faced by EU countries relating to significant labour shortages, which require better management of legal migration channels for skilled migrants, while tackling the problems which have resulted from the so-called “refugee crises”.

The current report sums up the findings and conclusions of the document and policy assessment and mapping exercises, aimed to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for TCN integration in the city of Sofia. The main objectives of the CITY AUDITS are to 1) provide an updated picture of the local context at document and implementation level on the integration of TCN in each partner city; and 2) to develop a pool of good practices and self-assessment tools for city-level measures on urban safety and TCN integration. The city audit methods included city walks with checklists to assess the city's achievements in terms of policy, urban development, safety and security, services for TCN and attitudes to migrants. The combination of methods was chosen in order to identify the most effective and sustainable city practices as well as to identify areas and issues in need of improvement regarding TCN integration. Drawing upon the findings of the city audits each partner will develop a *City Integration Agenda* (CIA) with future scenarios for each city involved in INTEGRA. The CIA will be elaborated with the active participation of target groups and stakeholders in special events, *City Integration Labs*. Based on the agendas, awareness and advocacy activities will be planned and carried out in each partner country.

Various documents were consulted in the preparation of this report (publicly available municipal and national strategies, action plans for urban development, social services and education, public safety and security plans and ordinances; annual reports for the

implementation of the said strategies); secondary data review, thematic reports and projects implemented by NGOs, media publications.

The report is structured as follows: part one presents the findings from desk research; part two sums up the conclusions of the focus groups held in Sofia, and part three describes the method and results of the *photovoice* activity.

Part I. City/Municipal Context

Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria, located in the southwestern part of the country. Sofia is the largest city and cultural, political, and economic center. In the past 5-10 years, the city has seen a significant increase in living standards, as well as a substantial increase in tourism – in the top 3 in Europe. The capital is also the main education center, with a total of 20 universities and specialized higher education institutions situated on the territory of the city which is about 45% of the higher education institutions in the country. In addition, the city enjoys a favorable geographical location – Sofia is a unique point of intersection of several main transport lines connecting Europe and Asia. Overall, Sofia has a dynamic labor market, jobs availability, relatively low levels of unemployment; the service sector, the ICT sector, cultural and creative industries have seen consistent growth in the past ten years, coupled with a steady trend in rising salaries. Sofia region (capital) concentrates 19.0% of the population and 21.7% of the work force in the country.²

On the territory of Sofia Municipality are concentrated most of the state agencies and public authorities with responsibilities regarding migration and integration– the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour and Social policy, the Employment Agency, National statistical institute, State Agency for Refugees, The National Council on Integration and Migration. The council operates as a link between the institutions concerned, the local authorities and the non-governmental sector involved in migration management initiatives.

The greater metropolitan area has a population of 1.3 million with approximately 800 000 people employed in the city. Unfortunately, Sofia does not maintain official records of statistics on the number of TCN residing in the city, despite the fact that by law TCN are required to register with the city authorities within 14 days of arrival. The relatively sparse national statistics available offer the following picture of TCN in the country and in Sofia. With a growing population, rapidly expanding tourist sector, and prospects for innovation and economic competitiveness, Sofia is on a path that will necessitate good integration policies and strategies for welcoming foreigners.

Part II. Main Audit Findings

1. Desk Research

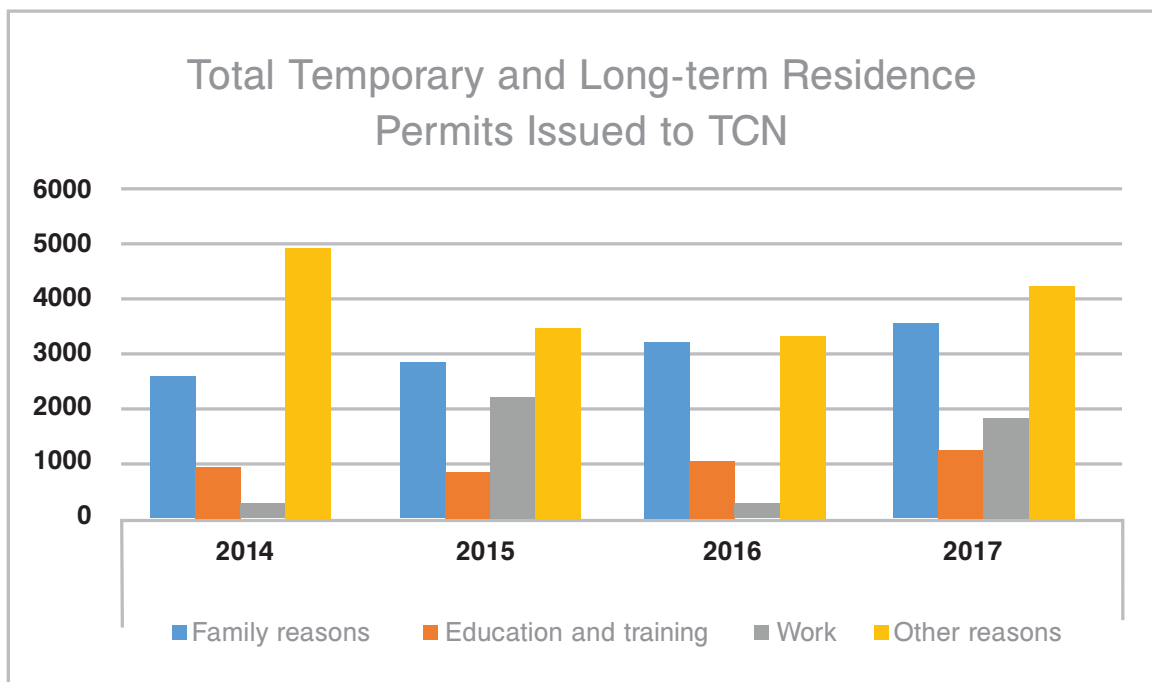
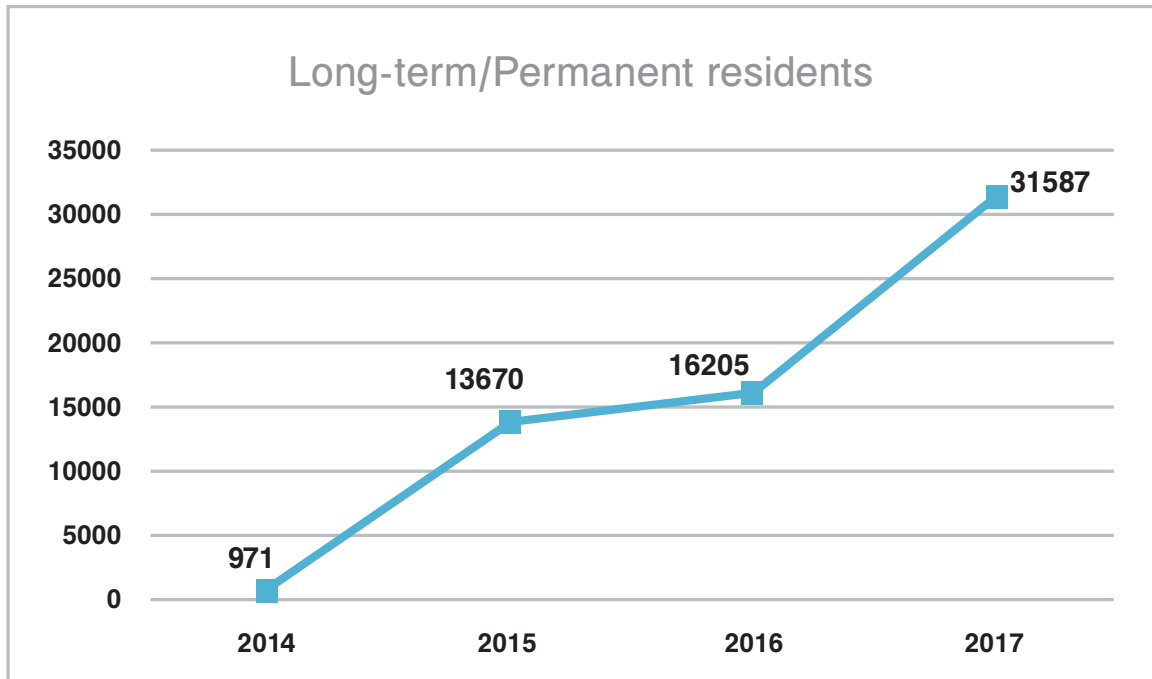
By law, TCNs must apply in person for all visa related issues. Because both the national Migration agency and the Municipal police directorate are located in Sofia, their experience with the national policies is inherently associated with the services that welcome TCNs in Sofia.

Available data shows that between 2014 and 2016, the number of TCN nationally increased with nearly 45 percentage points, from 40614 to 58807 people, which is less than 1 % (0.82%) of the country population. Women TCN represent a slightly higher share of the overall female population than men TCN of the overall male population (0.84% compared

² Пазарът на труда в София 2017, http://investsofia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Labor_Market_in_Sofia_Report_November-2017_BG.pdf

to 0.81%); however, the male TCN population marks faster growth than the TCN female population (52 compared to 39 percentage points). In terms of countries of origin of TCN as of 2016 the largest group is from Russia (19 653 persons), Turkey (9074 persons or 25%) and Ukraine (4339 persons or 21%). The national immigration data for 2017 shows total of 12 537 persons, of whom 11 888 TCN from outside the European Union, including undocumented migrants.

The following tables shows the long-term working permits issued:



Source – National Statistics Institute

The population of TCN and migrants in Sofia is low relative to the total population. There are wide residential areas which only in the recent few years have seen the first signs of immigration. The city has developed migrant neighborhoods of Middle Eastern communities downtown. The distribution of migrant population is uneven, with a concentration of ethnic communities within one central district and others dispersed according to municipal housing

and employment. Sofia is a historically rich city, but is a good example of coexisting cultures, religions, and ethnicities.

Immigration law in Bulgaria allows those with proven family connections in Bulgaria an easier route to citizenship. This additionally favors historically displaced populations throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe, especially Russia, Ukraine, Macedonia as the predominant group of TCN in the country.

Policy and institutional framework

At national level, the document detailing Bulgaria's priorities with respect to migration and integration is The National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration for 2015 – 2020.³ It steps on the three previous national strategies adopted in the period 2008–2014 and updates them in the light of the current refugee crisis and the increased number of asylum seekers. Among the priorities for national policy are the good management of the legal immigration of third country nationals as well as the “attraction of highly qualified Bulgarian citizen emigrants and foreign nationals of Bulgarian origin for the purpose of permanent establishment in the country.”

The National Council on Migration Policy, established under the *National Migration, Asylum and Integration Strategy (2011-2020)*, chaired by the Minister of Interior in view of improving inter-ministerial co-operation and coordination between the structures engaged in the migration processes, functions as a linking unit between the respective ministries, the local authorities and the non-government sector engaged in the management of migration processes.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is responsible for formulating and implementing the policy for receiving third-country nationals on the labour market, for the signing of bilateral employment agreements and social security agreements with third countries, for assisting Bulgarian nationals in other Member States and nationals of other Member States in Bulgaria in exercising their employment and social security rights of EU citizens, for coordinating the Bulgarian policy for the integration of third-country nationals.

Sofia does not have a dedicated strategic document for TCN integration and provision of relevant services; this is partially due to the predominantly centralized approach of handling migration and integration issues at national level. Isolated measures for migrants can be found in various other municipal documents (on education, social services, urban safety and security, etc.) As a partner in the Open Cities project, an initiative of the British Council, in 2012 Sofia Municipality drafted a local action plan in the area of migration.

There is no specialized unit in Sofia municipality dealing with the integration of migrants at a local level and the design, implementation, and monitoring of related services (information, education, employment, health care, housing, etc.) But even at national level, there is no unit to analyze, elaborate, coordinate and coordinate the implementation of state policies on migration in its entirety the responsible institutions are scattered across the structures of several different ministries and agencies, making it difficult for them to interact and coordinate (as stated in the National Strategy, p.34).

According to the definition provided by the EU, integration of TCN includes actions aimed at increasing migrants' participation in society, support for language learning, introductory measures, access to employment, education and vocational training and the fight against discrimination. With the new National Strategy, local governments are responsible for the integration of beneficiaries of international protection (through an Integration agreement

³ <http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=963>, accessed on 18 September 2018

signed between the municipality and the beneficiary). A regulation of the Council of Ministers Integration Decree, adopted in 2016) makes provisions for the rights and obligations of TCN to be part of the integration agreement (Art. 4, par. 1, item 5) including for attending Bulgarian language training (Art. 17, item 4). It also stipulates the provision of information and consultation with regard to access to the labor market, the housing market and healthcare access (Art.7, par.1; Art. 9, par.1; Art. 14, par.10). According to a monitoring report for Bulgaria, The Integration Decree, has yet to be assessed for effectiveness as it was not used in 2016 and 2017, as none of 265 local municipalities has so far applied for funding in order to commence an integration process with any of the individuals granted international protection in Bulgaria.

City vision and services for TCN

The research and results from the focus groups point out to a main deficit: Sofia provides no specific services for TCN. There is a lack of direct contact with information about living in the city that would be relevant to TCN or visitors. Much of the experience of Sofia occurs in practice and on the spot. Furthermore, information about resources and services online is rarely available (translated) in English beyond the option to choose a language. There is an inconsistent design of webpages of different national agencies which further impedes the communication process between city administration and TCN.

However, as the *photovoice* activity demonstrated, there are no standard procedures and practices for provision of information materials available at the offices of the main institutions such as the Employment Agency and the network of employment bureaus, the Agency for Social Assistance. Information materials in Bulgarian, Russian and English have been prepared and are disseminated only through the Information center for Migrant Integration run by the International Organisation for Migration (as part of a project which started in 2009 with funding from the European Integration Fund (EIF) for centers in Sofia, Burgas, and Plovdiv). The center is conceived as a sustainable “one-stop shops” point for information, services, intercultural dialogue, effectively encouraging the full involvement and participation of immigrants in the social life of Bulgarian society⁴.

Well-intentioned projects by NGOs and one-off initiatives take hold in select places, but are rarely able to expand into the mainstream, much less institutional policies. The private sector provides much of the services available to TCN, despite there being provisions in law for the access and assistance owed to migrants. Because migrants are expected to make the first step towards integration by seeking out and signing an integration form, the municipality’s role is limited to simply maintaining the capacity for providing the services and support legally owed to migrants.

Employment and access to the labor market

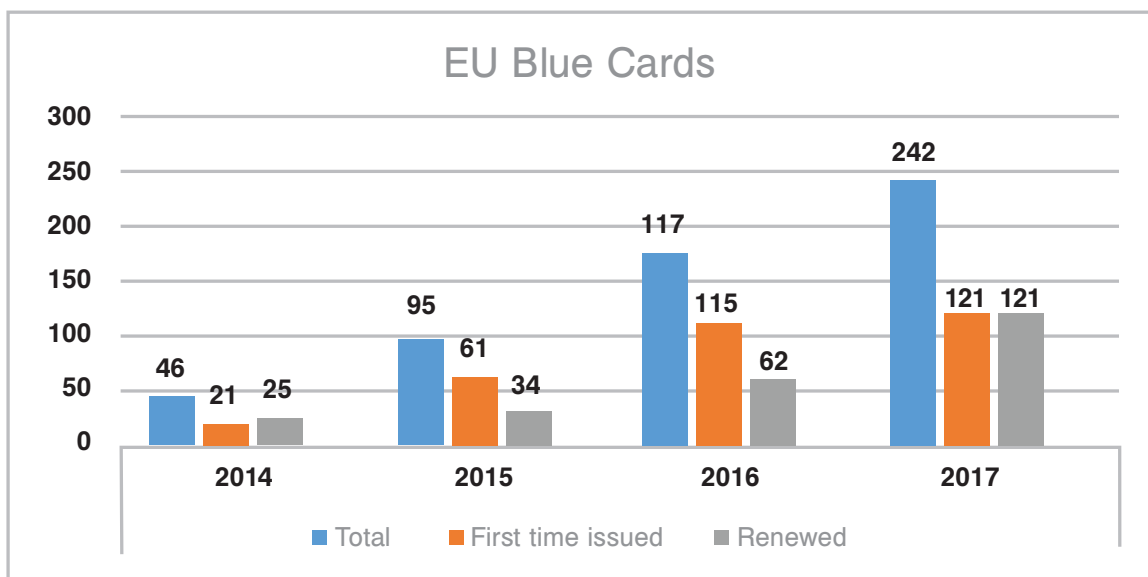
Recent changes in Bulgarian law permits an increase from 10% to 20% and 35% (for small and medium enterprises) of the employed labor force to be foreign nationals. These relaxed labor market regulations require employers to give priority to citizens with the same qualifications, which has an intended effect of increasing the competitiveness of the domestic labor market by introducing foreign expertise.

Highly qualified TCN who come to the country will tend to be integrated through their workplace and will be well prepared via private services. Other TCN typically arrive via chain migration and therefore have available contacts within their migrant community. Recent developments in the labor market, as well as an aging population, have led to regulatory changes reflecting a more welcome environment for TCN workers. In 2013 Bulgaria passed

4 <http://integration.iom.bg/>. More than 7 000 legally residing TCNs have been covered by integration activities in the period between 2009 and 2015.

legislative amendments that aimed to attract more foreign investment to the country. In 2016 was removed the so-called ‘labor market test’. It required the potential employer of a third country national to first apply for a work permit, which could be granted, only if the employer manages to prove that there is no Bulgarian, or other EU national, or permanently residing foreign national, that can and wants to do the job in question. The changes concern, on the one hand, the possibility to acquire permanent residence (for an indefinite period) in Bulgaria, upon investment of significant amounts of funds for specific objectives. On the other hand, access to Bulgarian citizenship is facilitated for large foreign investors.

As of 2016, Bulgaria is able to attract some TCN with Blue Cards, EU work permits offered to foreign nationals for highly specialized work. Thus far, Blue Cards have been issued primarily to IT specialists. As of 2017, a Blue Card is valid for an extended period of 4 years without a need for renewal. Those who do work are typically well-integrated in their professional life, but cannot find much to offer beyond due to the low demand. The following table shows the number of Blue Cards issued since 2014.



Data: National Statistical Institute

For the first half of 2017 Blue cards were issued to 100 citizens from 11 countries; the largest number come from Ukraine, followed by Russia, China, India, Macedonia and USA. Most engineers, technicians and athletes were welcomed from Serbia, Ukraine, Turkey, the United States and Russia. For the same period, 155 IT specialists, engineers and managers from Russia, Ukraine, India, China, Macedonia and the United States received a Blue Card. A total of 3275 are foreign seasonal workers were registered.

City safety

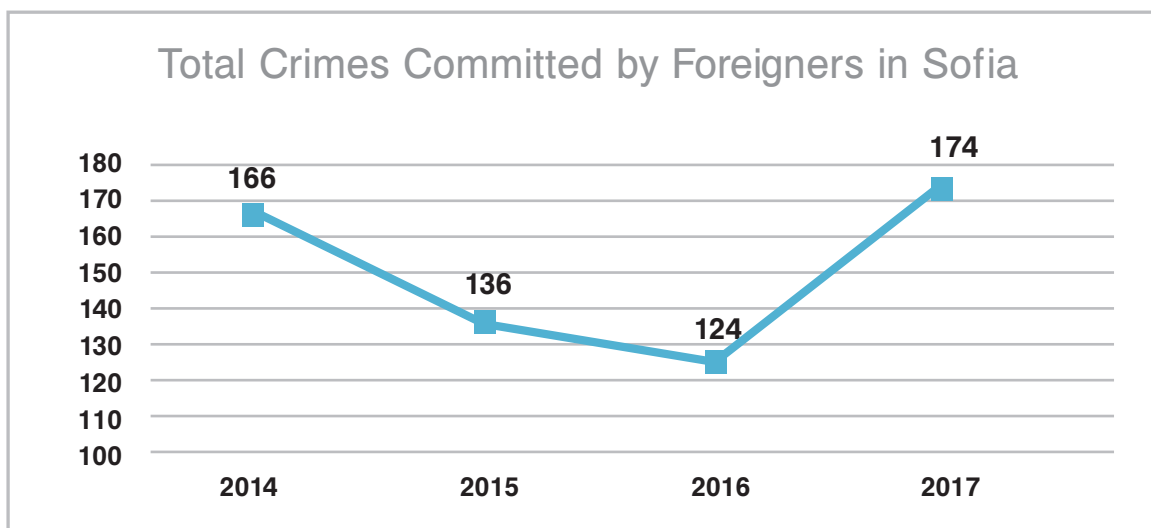
Sofia Municipality’s Security Strategy⁵ 2014-2020 factors into its security assessment and planning the concentration of minority populations. While this typically refers to Roma neighborhoods, it also includes migrant populations (primarily from the Middle East) in certain areas of the city: Blvd. Maria Louisa, Blvd. Slivnitsa, the Womens’ Market, Banski square, Lavov Most, Pirotska St. and Tzar Simeon St. Specific measures taken include the completion of a city-wide camera system, increased police presence in the form of patrols and 24-hour post in the area around the Women’s Market, as well as ongoing preventive and investigative police activity. Urban security is top down managed by police force. In recent years, Sofia municipality has invested in cameras (3500) and has established permanent and

⁵ https://www.sofia.bg/web/mayor-of-sofia/strategies/-/asset_publisher/A6phRQPDMA97/content/strategia-za-sigurnost-na-stolicna-obsina-za-2014-2020g-/20182?inheritRedirect=false

accessible presence in the districts with disproportionate ethnic composition. This tends to be a concern for policing undocumented migrants, although crime is low.

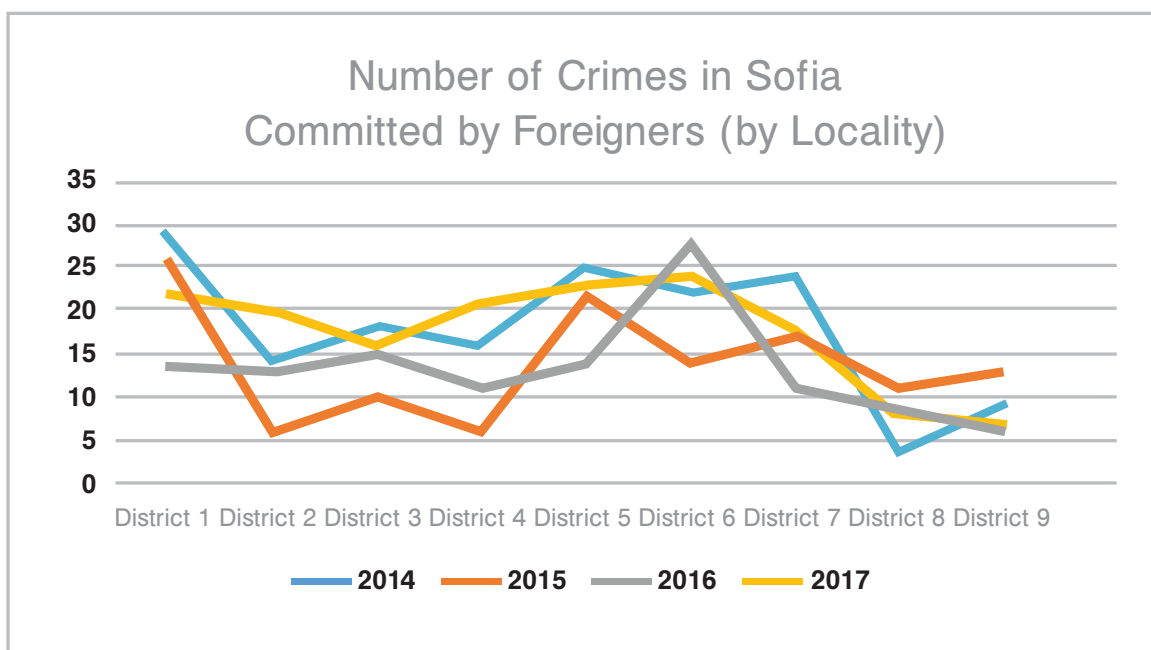
The research as well as responses from the focus groups confirmed that overall, Sofia is a safe city, both to its native citizens and to migrant communities. Isolated violent and hate crimes against migrants, especially from Africa and the Middle East, have occurred in Sofia, but have not increased the security risks for the city. Police have made several raids in the city in the past couple of years and have arrested undocumented migrants. Typically, this happens in one area of the city, around Blvd. Maria Louisa and Lavov Most, which is most ethnically segregated along nationality lines. These two regions constitute the primary locus of migrant and middle-eastern TCN communities.

On the other hand, such incidents have revealed racial motivations which need to be addressed by criminal justice bodies and civil society, especially because the investigation of hate crimes remains a difficult task for law enforcement.



Source: National Statistical Institute

The crime rate in District 6 reflects the territorial distribution of refugee and migrant communities, typically representing drug-related offenses.



Source: National Statistical Institute

Attitudes towards TCN and migrants

Although Sofia Municipality has not carried out or commissioned public opinion surveys on attitudes towards migrants and TCN, reports from NGOs indicate a high level of intolerance and xenophobia towards migrants and refugees (e.g., Open Society's annual report on hate speech). Many TCN, especially from certain countries, will not be able to find housing or a job due to prejudice.

Reports of planned increases in economic immigration are often poorly met by the public: on the one hand, Bulgaria's shrinking labor force is pressuring employers to hire more foreign workers – from Vietnam and India, for example – and on the other, the low wages and employment prospects for locals contribute to a perception of unfairness. These concerns reflect the insecurities the public feels about its own conditions.

In order to plan adequately future integration measures, the city administration should invest in collecting accurate, up-to-date information on the public attitude to migrants and TCN. A key factor of success in this respect is cooperation with NGOs which have a strong expertise on the topic.

Civic participation and social inclusion of TCN

One of the challenges to integration in Bulgaria is the fact that no national funds directed toward legal migration and immigration are available: the European Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration is the only source of public funding for integration of foreigners in Bulgaria. By law, the activities aimed at easing TCN and migrants' inclusion comprise trainings and legal consultations, Bulgarian language courses, information about the culture and history of the country. However, as a recent report shows, there a major issue in the provision of services to migrants and TCN is the lack of standardized courses for third country nationals, asylum seekers or beneficiaries of international protection for social and cultural orientation (teaching about the cultural traditions, history and geography, institutional and political system of Bulgaria). The type of measures provided since 2014 under the auspices of SAR include visits to museums, Sofia city tours and excursions in the country (Caritas, CVS Bulgaria)⁶.

As the *photovoice* and focus group activities demonstrated, a critical issues is the lack of information for TCN online, pertaining to their rights and responsibilities, is not available in English. Where it is available in Bulgarian, typically published are the laws pertaining to the specific issue, rather than direct links to help centers or useful information about how to take the next steps.

A large part of the services provided comes from the TCN (self-organized groups on Facebook), rather than the institutions. There is no form of governance model that includes TCN explicitly (such as a municipal integration council or similar body). Public discussions and consultations are open on each topic in Sofia municipality, but are typically attended by few individuals. The lack of an integrated municipal approach results in different city units addressing integration piecemeal without a managed distribution of priorities and tasks.

There is a limited amount of municipal funding for integration projects carried out by the NGO sector. However, a notable positive example and good practice is the Municipal grant-making program Culture which has funded projects related to migrant integration, such as cultural festivals, street festivals in communities with migrant population, etc. Another noteworthy example is the Sofia Culture Calendar; one of the events is the festival of Asian

6 Vankova, Z. (2014), Monitoring Report on the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria in 2014, Sofia, Bulgarian Council of Refugees and Migrants, p. 26.

cultures, which took place for the second time in 2018.⁷

The city administration will benefit from trainings and capacity building actions which will enable it to formulate and implement integration strategies in line with the priorities of both the national and the common European migration policy.

2. Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held on May 10 and June 7, 2018, gathering altogether 18 participants including TCN, NGO experts working with migrants and refugees, ministry experts working on state policies, and municipal experts working on local policies (Directorate Migration, Border Police, State Agency for Refugees, Sofia Municipality, the International Organization for Migration). The questions aimed to identify the participants' knowledge of key aspects relating to TCN integration such as available policies and strategic documents at municipal level; available funds allocated to TCN integration; public services provided to TCN; activities to raise awareness of the process of integration and TCN's contribution to society. Below is a summary of the focus group discussion.

1. TCN in Sofia

Respondents do not have information or statistics as to the number of TCN on the territory of the city of Sofia. Several explanations are given: no official statistics maintained by the city administration on the number of legally residing TCN; various levels of concentration of TCN and migrants in different parts of town; the role of the media overemphasizing the presence of foreigners, the ever increasing number of tourists. Statements by focus group members show that even among professionals there is a conflation of migrants, refugees, and TCN.

2. Attitudes towards TCN

The predominant attitude is evaluated as neutral to positive. The perception of TCN, and migrants, in general, depends on the age of the host population, the younger generation being more tolerant than the elderly; it depends on the origin of the host population, people from Sofia being more tolerant than people from the countryside; the migrant's race. Black people and people from Eastern Asia, more rarely people from the Middle East are most vulnerable and suffer verbal abuse, racist jokes and discrimination. As one participant stated, *"I have a black fellow student who does not leave his room in the dorm unless it is absolutely necessary. He tries to avoid unnecessary negative reactions."*

3. City vision and services for TCN

Focus groups participants agree that the municipality is somewhat involved in integration actions, but there are no strategic or policy measures in place. It is generally agreed that there is no available information: neither in the Ministry of Interior, though there is an empty information desk, nor online. Two significant differentiations were observed in responding to this theme: a/ between TCN and Bulgarian NGO experts, b/ between TCN with Bulgarian origin and those without prior links to the country.

TCN with Bulgarian origin (Bulgarian minorities abroad) are in a privileged position. They have existing information centers in Sofia that provide assistance and information regarding legal and administrative issues, education options, health insurance.

However, the vast majority of TCN have no knowledge of these services. Again, the reason is that there are no services provided by public bodies – national or local, and no unified source of information – a physical space or an online platform, in more languages than only in Bulgarian (and partially, in English).

⁷ http://www.peika.bg/Aziatski_festival_Tsvetovete_na_traditsiite__l.e_i.102752.html

The main problem identified is that local residents refuse to rent out houses to foreign citizens because they perceive them as a personal security threat (they'll be robbed, etc.) Participants recommend the municipality and the police to conduct regular checks of the temporary residence addresses of TCN.

Education is identified as a critical factor for successful long-term integration: *“by educating the children, we can more easily help the parents integrate as well.”*

4. Challenges and difficulties TCN face

- **Access to information:** Respondents stated that there are no information centers on the territory of the city for TCN; no information brochures or online sites offering information in multiple languages. This applies both to public institutions (city hall, hospitals, schools, public transport) but also to street signs, cultural facilities, universities. As one TCN said, *“The first thing every officer/administrator will tell you is what you cannot, or have no right to do, but there is no one to tell you what rights you have.”*
- High costs for administrative and other services, long waiting times for issuing documents.
- Limited access to health care.
- Limited access to affordable housing; local residents refusing to rent property to TCN.
- Difficulties obtaining a Blue Card, despite recent changes that relaxed the permit regime.

Recommendations

- The municipal administration needs to develop measures to provide easy access to information about city services and other information important to TCN on a regular basis.
- The municipal administrations should facilitate the process of employing TCN more easily; on the one hand, employers need skilled workforce but they are less likely to hire migrants or TCN. Services linking employers and TCN should be developed; the municipality can mediate the process.
- Information centers can be set up in each city district; online information must be provided in several languages. A mobile app can be also designed for easier communication and access to information.
- Appointing an ombudsman for TCN and migrants and a system for reporting discrimination and abuse of migrants, incl. hate speech/hate crime, and a helpline serviced by volunteers, etc.
- Sofia can partner with the Migration Directorate, SAR, NGOs, Ministry of Labor for joint actions to manage migration and improve the integration of TCN.

3. Photovoice

Sofia *photovoice* activity was held on May 16, 2018. Forty participants took part in the photovoice – representatives of NGOs and universities, third-country nationals (TCN), municipal officers, service providers, students, citizens.

Two major photovoice themes were given: *City, friendly to TCN and migrants* (positive developments, city measures and services assisting TCN integration, welcoming attitudes of the host society, opportunities for interaction and social inclusion, etc.) and *Less Visible*

TCN/Migrant Related Issues (Job search, Housing, Language Courses, etc.)

Over 122 photos were produced and uploaded to the Facebook group by the photovoice participants. The photos addressing the first – positive – theme dominated in number, which could be explained with the prevailing participants' attitudes and the limitations of the initiative, which captures predominantly static urban features.

The main topics/ideas/issues captured in photos are presented below, together with selected pictures.

+ positive features

Multicultural/global city cultural offering

Festivals, artistic events, cuisine strengthen the cosmopolitan character of Sofia thriving with events from all over the world. Thought according to TCN this benefits mainly the host population, the host population sees it as a tool for TCN integration through recreational activities.

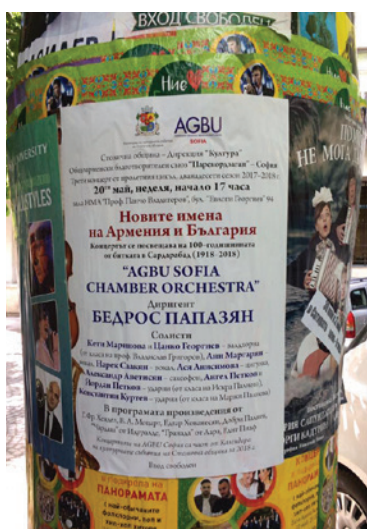


Photo by Peter Veselinov Butchkov

Photo by Rossanka Venelinova

Photo by Mina Kuteva

International education

Sofia is increasingly becoming a destination of choice for high numbers of TCN students. Education creates inclusive environments and reveals outstanding opportunities in jobs and life. International university programs and international secondary schools or municipal secondary schools with different languages of instruction are a great city integration asset.



Photo by Peter Minov



Photo by Rozalina Nedkova

+ positive features

Tourist-related city features

Tourism continues to expand and diversify and has become the fastest growing economic sector. The tourist facilities, tourist information points, signage, multilingual Free Sofia Tour, contribute to welcoming everyone.



Photo by Nicole Lehchevska



Photo by Renne Traicova



Photo by Elizabet Tzekova



Photo by Velizar Georgiev



Photo by Zoya Moiseeva

Wi-Fi

This is predominantly noted by young participants – 15-29 year-olds who value connectivity and easy and affordable services.



Photo by Yana Zdravkova



Photo by Boyana Voynova



negative features

Public transport and parking

Sofia public transport and parking system are not easy for a newcomer trying to learn their way around the city. The only exception is the metro. The bus/trolley/tram stops, routes and ticket offices have signs only in Bulgarian. Neither the ticket validation, nor the sanctions are properly explained. The parking system has English explanation signs; however, it can only be paid with a Bulgarian SIM card.



Photo by Sara Filippelli



Photo by Svetoslav Kostov



Photo by Nicole Lehchevska

Public services (state and municipal) supplemented by private services

There is no one-stop-shop for services and information for international citizens. The national and the local governments do not have the resources to be fully operative in English language in addition to Bulgarian. Photos document that services are in Bulgarian only, even when they claim they are in English.

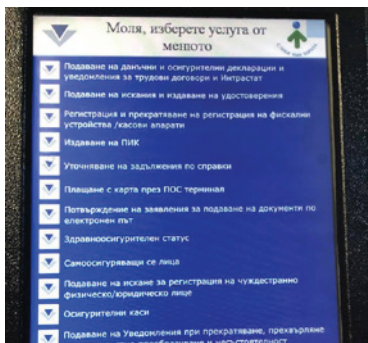


Photo by Rada Smedovska-Toneva



Photo by Miryana Malamin-Syriski



Photo by Martin Stoyanov

Public graffiti reflecting conflicts over values in intra- and inter-communal relations

Hateful graffiti and unattended signs of vandalism (broken public phones, burnt garbage bins, etc.) cause citizens and guests to feel less secure, also because there does not seem to be prompt and sound community response to this phenomenon.



Photo by Avel Ivanov



Photo by Svetoslav Kostov



Photo by Solomon Bali

– negative features

Correlation between integration of local disadvantaged groups and TCN

Some participants draw a parallel between the integration of disadvantaged local populations, such as Roma and homeless, and the integration of TCN. The overall argument is that if a city does not apply consistent and effective integration policies towards certain strata, it is unlikely to be more efficient in relation to other strata.



Photo by Renne Traicova



Photo by Irina Toleva

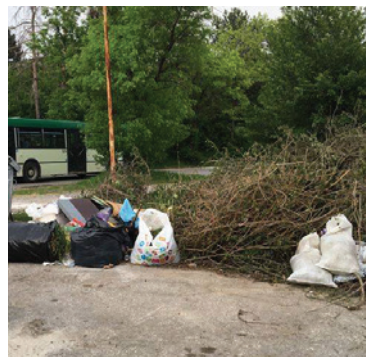


Photo by Krasimira Angelova

TCN job search and housing

Certain photos capture the challenge TCN face in finding housing or jobs since both are purely market oriented and there is no public/social intervention.



Photo by Metodi Valchev



Photo by Rada Smedovska-Toneva

City safety and ambience

A well maintained city environment urban environment is the basis for a safe, stable and thriving community. A rundown looking area becomes unattractive, decreases property values and changes demographics and disrupts communities.



Photo by Bistra Ivanova



Photo by Bilyana Bogoeva



Photo by Maya Dencheva

Recommendations

- Establishing a center/one-stop-shop to give a good start of TCN integration.
- Improving public facilities.
- Stricter regulations to stand guard over the principles of equity, non-discrimination, and non-exclusion.
- Due consideration of citizens' needs regardless of their origin in the public offer of services.
- More opportunities for the involvement of NGOs and citizens in the processes of TCN integration.

4. City Safety Tours and Checklists

The city tours for with checklists were held on May 16, 2018. The group consisted of thirty-eight participants who made three separate tours in the city, including places with higher concentration of TCN and migrants. The city routes were selected in advance by the organizers after analyzing relevant urban areas where TCN and migrant communities gather, live, work, or receive services (e.g. central place around the mosque and the synagogue, public market, central railway station, Migration Directorate, municipality, police departments, universities and libraries, information centers, cafeterias and entertainment places, known as a meeting space of different communities; etc.).

The four thematic checklists intended to assess the following aspects in the city's integration efforts:

- City Vision and Services;
- Civic Participation and Social Inclusion of TCN and Migrant Communities;
- Urban Environment and Safety;
- Attitudes towards TCN and Migrants

City vision and services

The average score of this topic is 2 out of 5 (1=poor, 5=excellent), indicating various deficiencies in the municipality's work for integration of TCN. Many of the comments made are consistent with the conclusions reached in the focus groups (e.g. Sofia municipality needs to make strong commitment to integration policies. At the moment there is no clarity what are the obligations of the state and what are those of the municipality. Other comments urge the administration to improve the instruments available to build a conducive environment for those people to participate actively in the social, economic and political life (legal assistance, information on different languages, job search, participation in decision-making, etc.). Sofia has good Wi-Fi coverage in public spaces, the high levels of connectivity are not exploited in their fullest potential to facilitate communication or service development/offer to TCN.

- The lack of information services for TCN and for communication and awareness-raising in the host society are rated the lowest.
- Recurring issues (consistent with the focus groups) are the poor information and legal services infrastructure; lack of information in different languages; poor access to housing and public welfare; lack of multi-lingual street signs (with the exception of the city center where such are available for the tourist groups); lack of municipally supported initiatives for integration; predominant role of NGOs in service provision, cultural offer, community work with and for TCN groups.

Civic participation and social inclusion of TCN and migrant communities

The average score for this topic is 2,5 out of 5. It shows a poor level of services and structures developed by Sofia municipality to enable better inclusion and participation of TCN and migrant communities. Comments and recommendations address the following main issues:

- NGOs are more active providing space, activities and initiatives for TCN. Sofia municipality could use their experience/channels to harness the potential of TCN and migrant communities in the city development, cultural life and integration. Over 90% say that they have not heard anything about the municipality's work for TCN.
- Media should be involved more in the process of developing positive images of TCN and promoting the contribution of TCN to society; more than half of the respondents believe media misrepresents migrants and provokes negative attitudes to them.
- Sofia municipality should attract funding (diversify own resources and seek foreign funding) to support more cultural events promoting different cultures of the TCN and migrant communities.

Urban environment and safety

The average score of this topic is 2,5 out of 5. Most respondents believe that Sofia has put some efforts in improving the urban environment and safety, but a lot remains to be done. The main critical remarks concern public safety (police security not equal for all Sofia districts; the central parts of the city are well covered by police patrols but peripheral and suburban areas are not); lack of street lights in some districts; city sections with abandoned buildings and run-down infrastructure are quoted as a safety risk for both Bulgarian residents and TCN; safety and security problems in marginalized neighborhoods are not addressed by the municipality. A further claim is that the municipality is not responding adequately to the problems of hate speech and hate crimes.

In terms of services, participants point that public transport schedules and rules should be translated in English. A relatively large share respond that they are not aware of the municipality's work for the city security, nor are they informed about the public finances used for that purpose.

Attitudes towards TCN and migrants

The average score for this topic is 2,1 out of 5. Most of the respondents are not aware of any mechanisms to measure and track the public perception of TCN and migrants. Political disparities in attitudes towards those communities are mentioned as a barrier for developing municipal integration policy (for example, the behavior of the nationalistic parties which are part of the present ruling coalition.). Most think that the city communication (publications, website, press releases, interviews, public statements, public functions) to promote a positive image of migrants in the city is not sufficient. The image of TCN in social networks is negative.

Recommendations

- The Municipality should develop mechanisms for gathering data and information about migration and diversity in the city.
- Negative attitudes towards migrants and TCN should be addressed seriously and tackled with all means (education, awareness raising, criminal justice, etc.).
- City branding activities to build shared sense of belonging and identity for all citizens are very sporadic and not sufficient. Sofia municipality needs consistent policy, financial support and focused efforts for those communities.

- Communication channels should be developed in order to improve the positive image of migrants in the city. Cooperation with NGOs and different institutions should continue.
- Positive examples and models of good integration should be encouraged and the information should receive a broad public coverage.

Part III. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The city of Sofia is the migration center of Bulgaria. It attracts more than a third of all foreign nationals in the country, which is representative for the dynamics and diversity of the most recent migrant flows in the country as well as of the historical presence in the city of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities from all over the world. As Bulgaria is slowly transforming into a receiving country and due to its position as an economic center, Sofia is to expect a rising number of immigrants (though forecasts depend on the scale of the migrants and refugee flows to Europe in the immediate and more distant future). This means that the city needs to put in place a municipal policy enabling it to manage successfully the immigration processes, including the integration of TCN, in order to harness the benefits of a culturally-diverse work force. The demographic picture of Bulgaria (and Europe) reveals population ageing trends. In an economic aspect this implicates labor force shortage which must be offset by importing labor from third countries. In this respect, the city needs to focus its future efforts on three major priorities:

Institutional arrangements and leadership: Sofia Municipality needs to develop leadership and administrative capacity to formulate and implement an effective long-term multi-sectoral integration policy, in line with European regulations and strategic priorities. Integration policy needs to have a body responsible for its implementation, including key stakeholders, and an annual budget allocated. Building the capacity of the municipal administration (skills and knowledge) to implement successfully policy commitments needs to be a key line of action for the city.

Communication and information support: As the report shows, there is acute need of a comprehensive information and communication strategy and respective measures aimed at 1) providing TCN with information about all aspects of the integration process (legal, economic, social, cultural, etc.) as well as 2) fostering intercultural sensitivity, facilitating intercultural dialogue and raising the awareness of Bulgarian citizens of migration, while preparing them to live and work in an increasingly multicultural environment.

Collaboration with national institutions and NGOs. Since the process of integration is multi-faceted, the city of Sofia needs to work in collaboration with all stakeholders (relevant national authorities such as ministries, businesses, schools etc.), in order to meet national standards and integration priorities and to use sparse resources more efficiently. The city will also benefit from a stronger collaboration with the civil society sector and the expertise of NGOs. Following the good practices of working social services providers, the Municipality may consider signing a memorandum of collaboration with relevant NGOs and their networks in support of its integration policies.

Part IV. Good Practices

Guide for Municipalities to Work with Refugees and Migrants

The Guide, developed by the Bulgarian Red Cross⁸, targets the municipalities and aims to provide information and guidance on the process of integration of beneficiaries of international protection. The Guide offers practical step-by-step instructions on the preparation and implementation of integration agreements between a given municipality and a beneficiary of international protection. The document outlines the responsibilities of each party (the Municipality and the procedural steps that municipal officials need to follow in order to facilitate the social, health care, labor market integration needs of beneficiaries of international protection.). It is in Bulgarian and is intended for municipal officials as a reference material.

Master's Programme in Social Work with Refugees and Migrants

Sofia University's introduced a new Master's program *Social Work with Refugees and Migrants*. It is the first of its kind in the country and is offered by the Faculty of Pedagogy, with the support of the UN Agency for Refugees (UNHCR). Its main goal is to prepare future specialists to work with refugees and migrants in the areas of housing, health, education, social and cultural orientation, psychosocial support, etc.

⁸ Наръчник за интегриране на лица с предоставено убежище или международна закрила в общините, Bulgarian Red Cross, 2017.

CITY INTEGRATION AUDIT REPORT FOR SOFIA, BULGARIA

Integration of Third Country Nationals
through Urban Partnerships - INTEGRA



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