

Specifics of the Social Work with Refugees in Bulgaria – Actual Topics, Achievements and Challenges

Siyka Chavdarova – Kostova¹

Abstract

Over the past three decades, Bulgaria has gained significant experience in social work with refugees arriving from areas where their lives are threatened by military actions. Until a few years ago, refugees were predominantly Muslim, from countries in the Middle East, while in recent years they have been predominantly Christian, mostly from Ukraine. Regardless of their origin, they have access to social services related to their residence on the territory of Bulgaria, which aim to ensure access to education, health care, and employment. A specific feature of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria is the very good interaction between state institutions, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, which work together, seeking the best solutions to support the stay of refugees in the host country and their social integration. As a result of this good cooperation, there are already refugees who have received Bulgarian citizenship, deciding to stay and live in Bulgaria. Of course, there are also challenges that still need solutions, such as providing sufficient opportunities for learning the Bulgarian language as a means for optimal educational inclusion and integration into the labor market, housing, etc.

Keywords

refugees, protection, social work, integration

1. Introduction and Methodology

Over the past three decades, Bulgaria has gained significant experience in social work with people seeking and receiving international and temporary protection, arriving from areas where their lives are threatened by military actions.

In the last years some changes are observed in the the flows of people seeking asylum:

- until a few years ago, refugees were **predominantly Muslim, from countries in the Middle East;**

¹ Dr, Prof., Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of Education, Sofia, Bulgaria. E-mail: S.ChavdarovaKostova@fp.uni-sofia.bg.

- in recent years they have been **predominantly Christian, mostly from Ukraine.**

As an illustration, some statistical data will be presented, providing information on the specifics of refugee flows passing through Bulgaria over the last years.

According to data from the State Agency for Refugees, the countries from which there are the largest number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria for international protection (01.01.1993 – 31.03.2025) are: Syria - 69467; Afghanistan – 56692; Iraq – 23934; Morocco – 7886; Pakistan – 4124 (State Agency for refugees. Top 5 countries of origin, 2025).

For comparison, data for the applications for international protection for the first three months of 2025 are:

- people from Syria - 328;
- Afghanistan - 185;
- Morocco - 144;
- Iraq - 44;
- Egypt – 30, as from Turkey, Pakistan, Tunisia, Algeria, Israel...
- total number - 823 (State Agency for refugees. Actual information, 2025).

As can be seen from the data, there is a coincidence in the first four countries that have a dominant Muslim population. Some of them are from the Middle East and other parts of Asia, and others are from countries in North Africa.

Regarding people with temporary protection from Ukraine, the data are as follows: The total number of Ukrainians who passed through Bulgaria in 2022 was 976 776. People with temporary protection, registered in Bulgaria:

- 2022 -149 685; for the first 3 months - 112 918;
- 2023 - 38 091; for the first 3 months - 5 795;
- 2024 - 24 536; for the first 3 months - 4 831;
- 2025 - for the first 3 months - 3 840;
- total number: 201 203 (State Agency for refugees. Registrations for temporary protection, 2025).

The term of validity of temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria for Ukrainian citizens was extended until 04.03.2026 by Decision No. 79 of 20.02.2025 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria amending Decision No. 144 of the Council of Ministers of 10 March 2022 on granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine (State Agency for refugees. Actual information, 2025).

According to the data, the number of Ukrainian citizens registered for temporary protection for the period 2022 - 2025 exceeds the number of those

seeking international protection from the five countries with the largest number of people entering the territory of Bulgaria. However, this does not mean that Ukrainian citizens have experienced greater difficulties in terms of the social integration compared to other asylum seekers. The proximity of the languages as slavic - Ukrainian and Bulgarian, some cultural similarities, including the religious aspect - predominantly Christians in both countries, facilitates the process of adaptation and integration into Bulgarian society of Ukrainian citizens.

What is specific to Ukrainian refugees is that among the registered mostly are women, for example, data from 2023 show that women are 49%, children – 33% and men - 18% (Statistics for the period January – August, 2023). In contrast to these data, men predominate among those seeking international protection. For example, as of 31.08.2023, the data are as follows:

- Persons seeking international protection: Men – 89% (11773), Women – 11% (1471).
Distribution by age: 0-13 – 1356; 14-17 – 2437; 18-34 – 8236; 35-64 – 1198; 64 – 17.
- Persons granted international protection: Men – 73% (2877), Women – 27% (1080).
Distribution by age: 0-13 – 969; 14-17 – 299; 18-34 – 2046; 35-64 – 623; > 64 - 20 (Statistics for the period January – August, 2023).

The methodology of the study is based on secondary analyses of statistical and public data, mainly in internet sources of main institutions engaged in working with refugees in Bulgaria. Based on these analyses, through the synthesis method, a picture of the main aspects of contemporary social work with refugees in Bulgaria is outlined.

2. Literature Review. Theoretical, conceptual and contextual framework

In the last few years, there has been a resurgence of research interest in work, including social work, with asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria. A significant contribution to this has been made by the Academic Bulletin, published in Bulgarian language online 15 issues from 2020 to 2023 by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants with the support of the representation of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Its issues reflect the opinions of practitioners, representatives of state and non-governmental organizations, as well as lecturers from higher education institutions engaged in research on refugee issues. There, one can find statistical and other information related to the current situation in the relevant period, about achievements in the process of social integration of

refugees, as well as about the main challenges they face in it not only in Bulgaria, but also abroad (Academic bulletin).

The social work with refugees in Bulgaria has been gradually built as a practice over the past three decades. It can be said that at the beginning it developed mainly thanks to the activity of the Representation of the High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria through a network of non-governmental organizations, which practically implement a variety of activities - from initial humanitarian aid, through assistance in learning the Bulgarian language, orientation on the labor market, social assistance to meet basic needs, psychological counseling, etc. On the part of state institutions, the leading role is played by the State Agency for Refugees, that through its structures implements state policy in this direction.

In the social work with refugees in Bulgaria, there is a mutual complementarity between the state and non-governmental sectors, which requires the results achieved in both to be taken into account, also this publication. That is why the leading approach in this study is the holistic one.

3. Actual topics of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria

Regardless of their origin, all people – with international and temporary protection, **have access to social services** on the territory of Bulgaria, which aim to ensure access to education, health care, and employment.

Specific topic that is very well developed in Bulgaria is **the social work with children** seeking and receiving international protection. These children are considered as one of the vulnerable groups whose representatives need special care. A key focus in this area is working with **unaccompanied children**.

Since 2017, the number of unaccompanied children in Bulgaria has been growing. By mid-2024, their number is about 70% of children with submitted applications for international protection. Within three years - between 2021 and 2023, applications for international protection were submitted by 10 363 unaccompanied children, in the first 5 months of 2024 the number was 416 (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

For the first 3 months of 2025, such children are from countries as:

- Afghanistan- 52;
- Egypt - 23;
- Syria - 20;
- Morocco - 9;
- Tunisia - 3;

- Iraq - 3;
- Algeria - 1 (State Agency for Refugees. Actual information, 2025).

As can be seen from the data, unaccompanied children are from countries with a dominant Muslim population, which confirms the above-mentioned characteristic of the flows of people seeking and receiving international protection in Bulgaria. This undoubtedly reflects on the specifics of the approaches to working with such children, including ensuring access to education and learning the Bulgarian language in an out-of-school or school environment, as well as providing people working with them who speak their languages and have the same/similar cultures of origin.

In response to the specific needs of this group of children, separate areas – **protected zones** have been created in the last few years where they are accommodated separately from adults seeking international protection. These zones are considered as a “temporary measure” for children - their stay there should “be as short as possible and they should be promptly provided with a family or family-like environment, in accordance with generally accepted international standards”. It is important, after the accommodation in the safe zones, “access to alternative care and social services (such as foster care, family-type accommodation centers, transitional or protected housing)” to be ensured, through which children refugees could feel “a security, a sense of belonging, as well as a close-to-family environment, which is essential for their well-being and development”. Unfortunately, it is noted that “despite efforts to increase the number and capacity of services for children in the country in recent years, many of them are still not ready to work with refugee children in order to meet their specific needs” (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

Such zones were created in the Registration - Reception Center (RRC) of State Agency for Refugees in Sofia (SAR) as an initiative of the mission of International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Sofia. The first zone in Voenna Rampa was opened on June 19, 2019, with a capacity of 100 children. The second zone was opened in Ovcha Kupel in January 2020, with a capacity of 138 children. The work in them is carried out on the basis of a specially developed “Methodology for the conditions and organization of social support provided in the Safe Zones for unaccompanied minors and underage children seeking international protection”. The zones provide 24-hour care by social workers, most of whom are from the children's countries of origin. In the first zone, the majority of minors are from Afghanistan, but there are also those from Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, mainly males. In the second, there are again predominantly male minors from Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, etc. Social workers, as well as the IOM mobile teams,

which include psychologists and lawyers, have the following main commitments:

- “Registration and accommodation of newly arrived children (after registration by SAR);
- Checking the presence of children in the zones every morning and evening;
- Explaining the rules in the zones and ensuring their compliance, as well as compliance with the daily schedule by the children;
- Individual consultations - social, psychological and legal;
- Case management;
- Escorting to medical services outside the RRC and purchasing medicines;
- Distribution of non-food items such as hygiene materials, clothes and shoes;
- Organizing group activities - information sessions on various topics, sports events, art and music workshops, informal educational activities, visits to cultural, natural and historical sites and events, etc.;
- Cooperation with the legal representatives of the children appointed by the National Bureau of Legal Aid (NBLA);
- Supporting the educational process – regular contact with the class teachers of the children who attend school and assistance with studying Bulgarian and school lessons, as well as support for preparing homework”.

Working in the zones poses a number of challenges for the people working in them: “The presence of a high turnover of unaccompanied children, mainly in the Safe Zone in the RRC Sofia, Voenna Rampa district, which does not allow for in-depth work with the children, including from the point of view of resolving issues related to their health and psychological state”; “A large part of the children accommodated in the zones are between the ages of 15 and 17 and consider Bulgaria a transit country, which makes it difficult for them to be motivated to attend school, as well as to comply with the rules in the zones, including maintaining cleanliness and good hygiene in personal and common spaces in the zones and participating in activities organized by IOM and other organizations.” (Safe zones for unaccompanied children in the RAC Sofia)

The third zone was opened in town Harmanli on May, 16, 2024, in the frame of the biggest Registration - Reception Center of the State Agency for Refugees on the Turkish-Bulgarian border, with a capacity of 98 children. In all three zones there are separate areas for girls and children with disabilities. At the opening, 58 children have been accommodated there. Among the main goals for its creation are “every child to receive appropriate care and protection, support for accommodation in a social service,

monitoring of the individual case and needs, as well as the opportunity to reunite with his or her family” (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

From 2019, when the first zone was created, to mid-2025, more than 10 000 unaccompanied refugee children have passed through them. While in 2019, 197 children were accommodated there, in 2022 they were 2 116, in 2023 – 2 569, for the first half of 2025 they were 294. This large number of unaccompanied children is a serious challenge as it requires answers related to their accommodation, care, education, and personal development (SAR, 2025).

The most recent fact related to the referral of refugee children to various types of social services is the project launched by the State Agency for Refugees entitled “Creation of Alternative Social Services for Unaccompanied Refugee Children in Bulgaria”. The project is funded by the European Union through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and is being implemented in partnership with several Bulgarian municipalities, mainly in Southeastern Bulgaria - Burgas, Malko Tarnovo, Tunzhda and Ivaylovgrad, UNICEF Bulgaria and the Mission of the International Organization for Migration in Bulgaria. The project aims to pilot “sustainable alternative solutions outside of institutions - for better integration, social protection and quality care” for unaccompanied minors in these four municipalities.

In the words of the Mayor of Burgas, Dimitar Nikolov: “Burgas was the first to create specialized transitional housing for unaccompanied minor refugees. /.../ Our experience has shown that with a professional approach and humane attitude, these children can be a full part of society. I am glad that with this project we will expand the opportunities and pass on our model to other municipalities.” Deputy Mayor for Education, Health and Social Activities of Burgas, Mihail Nenov, adds that this is not just a “community service” for unaccompanied minors, but also an opportunity to take “responsibility for their care and their overall development”. This Transitional Housing for Unaccompanied Minors and Underage Refugees “provides specialized care for children and youth aged 15 to 18, through a team of specialists who provide individual and group support, psychological counseling, occupational therapy and interest-based activities”. These activities aim to build „skills for independent living and full integration into society“. The project envisages training by the Municipality of Burgas for the application of the developed model in other municipalities, among which an exchange of experience will be carried out, as a result of which a „sustainable network of services for supporting unaccompanied children and young people between 15 and 18 years of age“ plan to be created (A project to provide social services for the integration of refugee children, 2025).

In addition to caring for unaccompanied children, Bulgaria also has other focuses aimed at the integration of refugee children in general. The main challenge here is **the learning Bulgarian language**, which is a key tool for successful integration into the education system. In recent years, the number of learning resources available free online for learning Bulgarian by refugees, from level A1 to level B2, has increased.

UNHCR Representative Office in Bulgaria and its partners in the country provide **a variety of free and accessible study materials in Bulgarian language:**

- Bulgarian language - levels A1, A2, B1, B2 - textbooks, exercise books, notebooks - dictionaries, audio files, grammars, including translations into English, French, Arabic, Farsi
- educational materials in Bulgarian on refugee-related issues for different age groups - 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 years;
- various didactic materials supporting the study of the Bulgarian language, developed through projects by non-governmental organizations (Teaching resources. UNHCR Bulgaria).

Such resources are also available on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science, in the “Inclusive Education” section:

- Bulgarian language textbook for primary school level - A1 and A2 - part 1
- Bulgarian language textbook for primary school level - A1 and A2 - part 2
- Bulgarian language textbook for lower secondary grades - A2
- Bulgarian language textbook for lower secondary grades – B1 (Children and students seeking or receiving protection).

Teaching aids are also developed and applied in work with children by non-governmental organizations, for example, the Reachout Foundation, which creates a “package of educational materials “ABC First Steps”. This package includes a handbook and a workbook, with the content developed within the framework of “10 topics through which words, grammar and interesting facts about Bulgaria are learned” (ABV - first steps).

It can be said that there is already sufficient resource provision in terms of ensuring the acquisition of Bulgarian language by refugees - children and adults. As for the inclusion of refugee children in the education system - equal access is ensured for all, and for this purpose, relevant normative documents have been developed within the framework of Bulgarian policies in the field of inclusive education. In 2017, an Regulation on the conditions and procedures for the reception and training of persons seeking or granted international protection was adopted. According to the Regulation, Art. 2: “Persons seeking or granted international protection shall

be provided with free education in state and municipal schools of the Republic of Bulgaria under the conditions and according to the procedure for Bulgarian citizens.” Enrollment is possible throughout the school year, with the exception of the last 30 days of the second school term (Art. 4). It can be said that the care of children with international and temporary protection is one of the priorities of the educational and social work systems in Bulgaria. For these children, additional Bulgarian language training is provided for those who are of mandatory preschool and school age (Art. 8) (Regulation No.3 of April 6, 2017).

Learning the Bulgarian language is one of the main challenges facing the social inclusion of adult refugees and migrants in the labor market in Bulgaria. It is a key condition for finding a job and satisfying their basic needs. Therefore, it is extremely important to overcome the existing language barrier, taking into account the fact that “the nature and intensity of these challenges vary across different groups”.

As for the acquisition of Bulgarian by adults with international and temporary protection, results from a recent study conducted in 2024 show that there are several main challenges, among which the following stand out:

- For those who work and those who take care of children, “consistently find it very difficult to attend existing language classes, which frequently take place during conventional working hours”. This affects the effectiveness of learning the Bulgarian language. A solution to this problem may lie in organizing „more flexible, accessible, and context-sensitive language learning programs that accommodate the realities of refugees' lives“.

- Low motivation of some refugees, for example Syrians, who intend to move to other countries in Western Europe (specifically Germany), where their communities are already established.

- Ukrainians show a much better command of the Bulgarian language compared to the other refugees and also have “a greater interest in learning Bulgarian”. 62% of the Ukrainian participated in the survey showed “some ability to speak Bulgarian – a linguistic capacity far exceeding that of their Syrian counterparts”. The reason for this is the proximity of the Bulgarian and Ukrainian languages.

Overall, the successful social integration into Bulgarian society presupposes the availability of “adequate and consistent language support” for child and adult refugees, without which there is a likelihood of deepening “their isolation and marginalization, making it exceptionally difficult to navigate daily life and services in the host country without a means of basic communication” (UNHCR, 2025). It is interesting to note that despite the provision of accessible and free textbooks and teaching aids for studying Bulgarian by refugees, one of the main difficulties they face is the problem

of “access to adequate Bulgarian language classes”, which is considered as a “fundamental barrier to integration” (UNHCR, 2025). The issue of motivating refugees to learn Bulgarian should not be overlooked, especially for those who wish to move to other countries where they have relatives or compatriots, and see Bulgaria more as a transit country than a final destination, taking into account the fact that learning any language requires a serious personal investment of „time and effort“ (UNHCR, 2025).

Another key issue related to the effective social inclusion of refugees is that of **employment opportunities** and achieving “sustainable livelihoods”. And here differences were found between the Ukrainian and Syrian refugees. Ukrainians have been more successful in the Bulgarian labor market than Syrian refugees. The main challenge for both groups is the nature of the jobs they are employed in - mainly low-paying jobs that are insufficient to support their livelihoods (66 % of all persons that have found a job) and “unfavorable working conditions” in many cases. This also applies to refugees with previous work experience and developed professional skills, including Ukrainians. Here, the problem of the availability of “opportunities for refugees who wish to start their own businesses or find employment that genuinely matches their existing skills and work experience” comes to the fore. This situation with the employment of adult refugees in Bulgaria raises several additional questions, one of which is related to the employment opportunities of women with more children, since the salary of the man alone is not enough to cover the family’s expenses. Here, the question of employment opportunities and additional training for refugee women comes to the fore, directly related to the opportunities for caring for their children when they are engaged. It is no coincidence that in this context the more general question of “ensuring the proper integration and well-being of refugee families” is raised (UNHCR, 2025).

The topic of refugee **well-being**, in its diverse dimensions - social, emotional, intellectual, has only recently begun to be discussed as an important issue related to their integration and inclusion in the host societies. It is important to emphasize the necessity of both the contacts and interactions created with people from the local community, as well as the opportunity to maintain relationships with representatives of their communities, which is “vital to refugees' mental health, well-being, and overall inclusion”. In Bulgaria, both Syrian and Ukrainian refugees maintain contact with other compatriots. Ukrainians, for example, note that they receive “various forms of support and information from their community networks in Bulgaria”. Syrian women in particular “specifically expressed feeling safe within their neighborhoods”. In general, refugees have “positive observations about the overall receptivity of the host community, noting an absence of harassment or ill treatment”. Regardless

of the above, there are still specifics in the process of social integration in local communities. While positive interactions are noted at the beginning, some refugees point to “limited ongoing engagement with Bulgarian co-workers and neighbors”. One of the reasons for this fact is the presence of “persistent language barriers, which hinder more profound communication”. Among the refugees there are also those who fear rejection by the local people, which is interpreted as a “deterrent to proactively reaching out and forging closer bonds with Bulgarians” (UNHCR, 2025).

Despite the many opportunities for effective social integration of refugees into Bulgarian society, there are still limitations that are considered “barriers to achieving full social and economic inclusion”, some of which have been commented on as “systemic”. Overcoming them requires a combination of efforts, at the state and local level, by institutionalized structures and civil society organizations, in order to provide all refugees with “comprehensive, tailored, and sustained support across all key integration domains” (UNHCR, 2025).

A specific feature of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria is **the very good interaction between state institutions, non-governmental organizations, international organizations**, which work together, seeking the best solutions to support the stay of refugees in the host country and their social integration. A recent example is the establishment of the the above mentioned Zone for Unaccompanied Children in the town of Harmanli as a result of the cooperation between the State Agency for Refugees, UNICEF Bulgaria, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Bulgaria and with the financial support of the State Department for Migration (SEM) of Switzerland (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

Another example is the **Compass Bulgaria Network of Protection and Inclusion Centres** – since the beginning of 2024. This is a joint initiative between: UNHCR and partners as Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas Bulgaria, Foundation for Access to Rights, Ukraine Support and Renovation Foundation, Energy Association Varna. Such centers were created in six cities with concentration of refugees in Bulgaria - Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, Dobrich, and Harmanli. These centers are “established to promote collective empowerment, integration, and social cohesion for refugees of all nationalities and vulnerable people among the local host communities alike, through comprehensive support tailored to their diverse needs” They “complement services offered by the national/regional authorities and the municipalities with activities addressing mid-to-longer term needs of refugees, including language, cultural and livelihood”.

The services in the Compass Centers are free of charge and include:

- **“Legal assistance and social protection** - Legal counselling on international –temporary protection and documentation; Support with referrals for access to health care services and rights; Access to social services and labour rights.
- **Specialized child protection services and child-friendly spaces** - Play and child development activities, Pre-school groups.
- **Women empowerment and life skills sessions** - Community activities and safe space; Support self-organization and leaderships skills.
- **Recreation, events, and workshops for local and refugee community.**
- **Community mobilization and social cohesion.**
- **Psychosocial support services** - Community and family support services through groups and art-based; activities, including parent groups; Individual counselling.
- **Livelihood and economic inclusion support** - Individual counselling on livelihood opportunities according to specific needs and market requirement (Entrepreneurship, TVET and soft skills training, mentorship programs and job placement support).
- **Education** - Language courses; Providing guidance on education and skills certification.
- **Mobile services and mainstreaming inclusion of persons with disabilities** - Coordination with municipal services to assist transportation for people with limited mobility (Varna); Assistance with social protection benefits, including disability benefits; Support with referrals for access to health care services and rights.” (Compass Bulgaria Network).

All of these services represent key aspects of the effective social integration of children and adults with international and temporary protection, and naturally the expectations are that the activities of these centers will contribute at the local community level to their active social inclusion.

A number of non-governmental organizations continue to work to help people seeking and receiving asylum. Traditionally, the Refugee and Migrant Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) is very active in this regard. According to their data, “annually, the BRC provides assistance and a wide range of social services to about 1 300 foreigners, mainly persons granted refugee or humanitarian status” (About Refugee – Migrant Service. Bulgarian Red Cross). Among their main “activities to assist foreigners who are in the process of granting status” are: “Social consultations, accompaniment and translation before state and municipal institutions, health facilities, etc.; supporting the education of children studying in Bulgarian primary and secondary schools.” With regard to people who have received refugee or

humanitarian status, the activities carried out by the Bulgarian Red Cross are: “Conducting Bulgarian language courses for persons who have received international protection; consultations on issues concerning the life and rights of refugees in Bulgaria; supporting access to medical care and services; assistance in finding a job; social and cultural orientation; supporting the education of children studying in Bulgarian schools through additional Bulgarian language training, provision of textbooks and teaching materials, etc.; supporting refugees with special needs - disabled people, single parents, adults, separated children.” The description of activities shows their main orientation in the field of social work in support of the process of adaptation and integration of these groups of people into Bulgarian society (Work with refugees and migrants. Bulgarian Red Cross).

Another non-governmental organization that works actively in the field of social work with refugees is Caritas – Bulgaria. According to their data, in 2024 they supported 9 833 refugees from both Ukraine and other countries. Among their main activities are: “complex support in the Caritas integration centers in Ruse, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna and Sofia” for citizens of Ukraine, expressed in “assistance with Bulgarian language training, extracurricular activities with children, specialized consultations for access to healthcare, finding a job, enrolling children in kindergarten and school and other types of support helping their integration in Bulgaria”; activities “to promote sustainable livelihoods and socio-economic integration of refugees in Bulgaria”, provided by Caritas career centers in the indicated cities for those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection – “assistance in finding a job, information and career counseling, training for professional qualification and upgrading of work skills, Bulgarian language courses for workers/job seekers, preparation of individual career development plans, mentoring and accompaniment, entrepreneurial program and assistance in starting one's own business” (Activities – refugees. Caritas – Bulgaria).

Among the non-governmental organizations carrying out active social work with those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection is the “Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria”. Their main mission is to assist these people “in the process of social, economic and cultural adaptation, striving to help them develop social and life skills, increase their faith in their own efforts and success, and promote active integration” in Bulgaria. Among their main activities are: providing “humanitarian assistance, social consultations, translations and representation before institutions and informing the refugee community about their basic rights and obligations”; assistance in “celebrating holidays, providing information about the countries of origin, familiarizing the public with them, as well as introducing the refugee community to Bulgarian culture, traditions and customs”. Their website is in five languages -

Bulgarian, English, Arabic, Farsi and Ukrainian, which facilitates access to information for those seeking help and assistance.

The Council of Refugee Women has two main “programs for direct work with refugees and persons seeking protection” – “social mediation and humanitarian support”. The first program involves social mediators who are both Bulgarians and people from Middle Eastern countries. The languages spoken by the social mediators are Bulgarian, English, Farsi and Arabic. They “go through mandatory internal training upon entry and subsequent upgrading training on a number of topics such as: humanitarian context of working with persons fleeing from countries of armed conflicts; protection of children at risk; difficulties in social adaptation, measures in cases of domestic violence and gender-based violence; responding to a crisis situation and developing a security plan, and others”. Some of the social mediators work with people in the reception center of the State Agency for Refugees in Sofia. The main emphasis of the humanitarian support program is the receipt of “essential items, according to the social situation in which they find themselves” – “clothes, shoes, blankets, cosmetics, baby supplies, children's toys, school supplies, kitchen and household supplies”, “baby milk, porridge and purees, partial furniture, cleaning products”. Regular donation campaigns are organized to collect these items and products. Donations are made both by “large corporate donors - manufacturing and/or importing companies, as well as individual donors”. The humanitarian program is more focused on the initial adaptation after arrival in the country, especially for people from vulnerable groups such as “unaccompanied children, as well as people in difficult social, health and economic situations - separated mothers and fathers, widowed spouses, people who have lost their relatives and are left alone, large families, adults and children with severe medical and psychological traumas” (Council of Refugee Woman).

Access to information is extremely important for those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection - both for initial orientation after arrival in the host country and for subsequent steps in the social integration process. For this purpose, the information website “Platform Refugee Integration in Bulgaria” was created by the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants. This website contains important information in the areas of integration as: “Identity documents; Housing; Helthcare and health services; Education; Employment; Social assistance; Family reunification; Citizenship”. The information is extremely practically oriented, detailed, highlighting individual steps in the process of carrying out relevant activities, available in Bulgarian, English, French, Ukrainian, Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish (Platform Refugee Integration in Bulgaria).

4. Conclusion

The article presents several **main reasons for the challenges** facing contemporary social work in Bulgaria with people seeking and receiving international and temporary protection - children and adults:

- specificity of cultural differences due to nationality, ethnicity, religion, spoken language;
- ideas about life, expectations, perspectives, goals that people arriving in the host countries have, to what extent they coincide or diverge from reality;
- readiness to make efforts - intellectual, emotional, physical, for integration into the life of the host country and active inclusion in various areas of life realization.

In the practical work there are still some **challenges that need solutions**, such as:

- providing sufficient opportunities for **learning Bulgarian language** as a means of optimal educational inclusion and integration into the labor market;
- realization on **the labor market** - validation of professional qualification documents issued by the country of origin, acquisition of new professional skills relevant to the labor market in the host country, continuing education, etc.;
- **housing** - finding a place to live, accommodation;
- **active inclusion** in the social life of the host community in various forms, etc.

Despite the positive experience gained over the past three decades in terms of receiving and integrating refugees in Bulgaria, it is clear that there is still much to be done to improve these processes so that refugees can develop their potential in their new place of life and actively participate in its various aspects - professional, educational, cultural, etc., thereby contributing to the development of the host society. The main determinants of achieving such results are both the motivation, efforts and commitment of the refugees, as well as the support from the local society, including high-quality professional social work provided by state, non-governmental and international structures.

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