

RESEARCH

**REPORTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS

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# THE WAGES OF FEAR

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN BULGARIA



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## INTRODUCTION

The study is the first step of the “Empowering Communities in Europe” project called “Give Me Voice” research and aims to collect and give space to the voices of young people in selected communities to explore through focus group interviews how hate speech and propaganda arise on fertile ground of economic and security fears<sup>1</sup>.

The three focus group interviews (FGIs) in Bulgaria happened in the period June-July 2017. Out of the three locations, one - Belene (24 June 2017) - had no refugee population at the time of the study, and the other two - Harmanli (29 June 2017) and Sofia (8 July 2017) – had. All of them were chosen because of specific reasons, connected with the migration/refugee<sup>2</sup> topic.

**Belene** is a small town on the Danube River in the North-Eastern part of Bulgaria, with a population of about 7500 inhabitants<sup>3</sup>, which became media-famous throughout the country due to an unsuccessful integration attempt to settle a single refugee family from Syria in the town in February-March 2017. The Syrian family was invited by the local Catholic priest, rev. Paolo Cortesi, to live in the town. A scandal divided the people of the town in “pro” and “contra” sides, shortly following a previous division concerning the independent actions of the Catholic priest, and ended up in a staged protest of about 20 people, vast media coverage, great pressure over the family and finally, their decision to leave the town not long after they have arrived, as well as the priest’s withdrawal from the Belene by the Catholic Church reportedly for security reasons. Thus, it remained a location with no refugee population.

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1 More about the project: <https://www.britishcouncil.pl/en/empowering-communities-europe>

2 Throughout the text, “refugees” will be used as a generic term, this is how it is used by the respondents too, who do not often distinguish between the phases of asylum seekers who are applying for status of international protection in Bulgaria, and the ones who have already received status. In Bulgaria refugee status is granted for 5 years and subsidiary status, called “humanitarian” – for 3 years.

3 The numbers of inhabitants of the three locations are given according to the “Population by towns and sex” data of the National Statistical Institute as of the end of 2016.

**Harmanli** is nearly three times bigger than Belene (20 000 inhabitants) and is situated in the South-Eastern part of Bulgaria, 60 km from the Bulgarian-Turkish border. It hosts the largest registration and reception centre for asylum seekers on the territory of Bulgaria with capacity of about 4000 people. This is the town where most asylum seekers pass through, there is very high visibility of asylum seekers/refugees, especially during periods when the centre is densely populated, thus the number of people walking in the town is raising enormously. Before the Reception centre was established in 2013, the issue of asylum seekers/refugees was not so popular with the local people. It is important to note, that the whole region of Harmanli and the villages around, have a large proportion of Bulgarian ethnic Turks and Roma people, the two largest minorities in Bulgaria.

**Sofia** is the capital of Bulgaria, with official population of about 1.5 million people, where most established migrant communities are already settled. Both official institutions and civil society organizations, which work in the field of migration (including international), as well as three registration and reception centres, are located here. Thus, Sofia serves as a stop for the asylum seeking newcomers, who are applying for protection or would like to continue their journeys to Western Europe, as well as the location that provides the highest possibilities for the ones who would like to stay in Bulgaria, due to the already developed network of communities and organizations that support them.

The guidelines provided for the process of recruiting participants and conducting the FGIs were followed<sup>4</sup> in all three locations. The preparation of the FGI in Belene required a preparatory visit to establish contacts with several key leaders of the local communities – the principle of the elementary school, the chairwoman of the community centre, young activists from the town. Good contacts were established with four informants who helped us recruit 9 young people for the FGI – 7 girls and 2 boys, aged 22 to 32. In general, it was harder to involve male participants than female, because of various reasons – most young men are work in agriculture at that time of the year or some of them have already left to the nearby seaside for seasonal work in tourism, others were still studying in the nearby cities' universities. The preparatory visit also helped identify the venue where the FGI would take place.

The FGI preparation in Harmanli was the easiest to organise, because of the

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<sup>4</sup> Age between 18 and 33; gender balance; participants should not know each other; economic status; diverse opinion on the reception of refugees, etc.

support of key partners from previous joint activities in the field, who recommended either young people to take part in the FGI, or other informants. Seven people confirmed, aged 18 to 33, 4 girls and 3 boys. At the day of the FGI, one of the girls cancelled, because of an unexpected situation, so the focus group interview conducted was perfect in size and gender balance.

The FGI in Sofia was most challenging to organise. Young people in Sofia have the most opportunities to be actively involved in various activities, compared to the other places, and are in general very busy, because of work, interests, etc. Many different youth and professional networks were mobilised to gather the requested number of participants. Most people waited to confirm to the very last moment, because of other activities. In the end, eight people took part in the FGI, 4 boys and 4 girls, aged between 21 and 31.

In terms of conversations and opinions gathered, all three focus groups were very successful and shed light to all aspects of the questionnaire provided.

### Part one: migration profile

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Republic of Bulgaria has been a country of emigration. Along this major trend, there also is a tendency of modestly rising immigration, as the country is attractive to foreigners with its affordable education, good environment for starting businesses and professional development (eg. cheaper labour, a lower flat tax compared to other European Union countries), wonderful nature and good quality of life. Nevertheless, even after becoming a European Union (EU) member, the number of foreigners has always been around 1 % of the population..

According to Krasteva and team, the map of the regions sending migrants to Bulgaria can be seen to comprise six poles:

- The largest group with the longest tradition is immigration from Russia, Ukraine and other countries from the post-Soviet area;
- The most recent but growing group is comprised of EU citizens who, according to the European legal norms incorporated into Bulgarian legislation, are not considered foreigners and exercise the right of free circulation of labour;
- Immigration from the Near and Middle East is part of a tradition nearly half a century old: Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghans etc.;

- African immigration is similar to the Arab group in relation to its half-century presence in this country; however numbers here are much lower; it is symbolically perceived as different because of the lack of any historical contact between Bulgaria and the African countries. It must be noted that immigrants from the Maghreb countries are very few and are part of the Arab community;

Chinese immigration is one of the most recent; it practically started from zero after the opening of the country in the early 90s.

- In recent years new sending poles such as the United Kingdom emerged. A considerable part of British are representatives of the so-called retirement migration and are attracted by the affordable prices of real estate, mostly in the rural areas. (Krasteva et al. 2011)

Most of these migrants are self-employed or are running small businesses (family businesses in most cases), as is the case with the Chinese and the Middle Easterners. Most often they hire other new migrants in their companies, thus providing opportunities for the newcomers. Lately, there is a tendency to hire migrants or other European Union citizens because of their language proficiency in call centres, an industry that becomes very popular in Bulgaria. Most of these employment opportunities are situated in Sofia. Therefore, the migration phenomenon in Bulgaria is rather an urban phenomenon, with the majority of the foreign population residing in the capital of Sofia (Krasteva et al 2011, Krasteva 2014).

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the start of the refugee crisis in 2013, Bulgaria found itself one of the geographic forefronts to face the refugee flows due to being external border of the EU with Turkey (along with Greece) on the land route to Europe<sup>5</sup>. In the current migration strategy of the country, the situation is illustrated as “a burden” of “mixed migration flow, including in its larger part asylum seekers and irregular migrants” (Strategy 2015-2020, 4). Bulgaria is predominantly a transit country due to several factors, including: the national policy, which puts a strong focus on securing the borders and on a zero-integration policy; the fact of being the poorest country in the EU; the general intention of most of the asylum seekers to reach countries like Germany, Sweden and Western Europe in general; the negative political discourse, and not least, the overall negative attitudes towards refugees from the local population. The overall dynamics on a European level (for example,

<sup>5</sup> In the period August 2015 – March 2016, refugees and migrants were using the so-called Balkan route to travel through Greece and Macedonia to Western Europe, passing through Bulgaria is an alternative route.

the EU-Turkey deal from March 2016), regional level (for example, the closed Western Balkan route in March 2016), give different nuances to the fluctuations and the intensity of flows, illustrated in the following table, but does not change the transit character of the country.

Table 1: Information on asylum applications and decisions on asylum applications in the period 2012-August 2017

Year	Number of international protection applicants	Refugee status	Subsidiary status	Rejections	Terminated procedures	Total number of decisions
2012	1387	18	159	445	174	796
2013	7144	183	2279	354	824	3640
2014	11081	5162	1838	500	2853	10353
2015	20391	4708	889	623	14567	20787
2016	19418	764	587	1732	8932	12015
2017	2633	692	771	2630	9142	13235

Source: State Agency for Refugees (August 2017)

The number of applications (Table 1) shows sharp increase of applications in 2013, a peak of applications in 2015, as light decline in 2016 and a significant decline in 2017, even though the number of applications in 2017 does not include the whole year (without the last four months). It is visible from the table that the number of rejections has increased in both 2016 and 2017 when the predominant number of applications became of people of Afghani origin as shown in Table 2 below.

The following table (Table 2) shows that for 2017, the highest number of asylum applications is received from nationals of Afghanistan. According to the report of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) the situation with the asylum applications in 2016 is similar, with 45% of all applications are by people of Afghan nationality, while in 2015 the highest number of applications comes from citizens of Syria (SAR report 2016).

Table 2: Top 5 countries of origin of asylum applicants (01.01.2017-31.08.2017)

Afghanistan	962
Syria	727
Iraq	484
Pakistan	187
Iran	69

Source: State Agency for Refugees (August 2017)

### RECENT TRENDS IN MIGRATION POLICY (SINCE 2015)

The migration policy of Bulgaria has a strong securitization focus. Driven by the motivation of entering the Schengen agreement, the country's migration policy emphasizes on building a fence, with the argument of securing the whole EU territory. In the latest strategy in the field of migration, asylum and integration from 2015, covering the period 2015-2020, the understanding of migration on a policy level is twofold – the phenomenon is recognized as a source of labour force (legal migration), necessary for the national economy, and at the same time as a potential threat for the security of the country (irregular migration, incl. asylum seekers due to their means of entry). As explained in the National strategy, the Republic of Bulgaria, being an external border of the EU, works for the implementation of the long-term, unified and clearly formulated policy of guarding the European border, fighting the illegal migration, smuggling and trafficking (National strategy: 4)

The priorities of the strategy also include providing a fair, efficient and transparent asylum procedure striking a balance in respecting human rights of the asylum seekers and protecting the national interest and security. Another priority is implementing concrete measures and services of integration for the beneficiaries of international protection, in the fields of access to education and Bulgarian language training, employment, qualification recognition, health services, social assistance, housing, integrations in the social, cultural and civil life in the society (National strategy: 40)

Although all these priorities are well elaborated in strategic documents, the facts show that in the period January 2013 – August 2016 in Bulgaria there was a zero integration policy until the adoption of an Integration Ordinance that

was never implemented and was repealed in the end of March 2017.<sup>6</sup> Another new Ordinance on Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection adopted by the Government in July 2017. These dynamic changes show the high politicization of the migration topic.

Like the repealed one, the “new” Ordinance emphasizes the role of municipalities in the process of refugee integration. None of the municipalities in Bulgaria has so far accepted and made an agreement with any refugee based on it. A positive development in the new Ordinance is that the so far missing coordination function is appointed to a Deputy Prime Minister. Other novelties are the new application period for refugees - now they can apply during the procedure of determining of their status and up to 14 days after being granted status. The main weak points of the new Ordinance are that it does not provide any housing opportunities and Bulgarian language training.

Other institutions, responsible for integration, are the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science. Under the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Employment Agency is implementing a program for employment and training of refugees since 2014, valid till the end of 2017 (which will be prolonged in 2018). A positive development is the Ministry of Education and Science’s Ordinance No.3 on the Terms and Conditions on access to education of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection that entered into power in April 2017.

The latest developments show that there are some positive steps in the normative basis on integration, however the implementation is still challenging, especially as none of the municipalities<sup>7</sup> in the country expressed an interest in accepting refugees on their territory.

### **Attitudes to migrants and refugees – changes since mid-2015**

For a year in a row the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) alarms in its annual report of 2016 on the deteriorated situation of human rights of migrants and refugees in Bulgaria, for example how migrants that walk along the streets of Sofia may become victims of racist gangs injuring them physically. “Refugee hunters” on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, who became notorious throughout Europe with their brutal deeds, enjoying impunity in the country (BHC 2017:9).

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6 This political act is requested by the newly elected president of Bulgaria from the interim government right after the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria on 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2017.

7 The territory of Bulgaria consists of 264 municipalities.

The report explains how their acts are abetted at the highest state level in 2016. In general, according to the report: “hundreds of migrants became victims of violence, robbery and harassment by the Bulgarian law enforcement authorities, as well by unlawful push backs from territory of the country” (BHC 2017:9).

Politicians condoning such acts of violence, shown in all kinds of media, form the general trend of a rather negative attitude among the local people to migrants and refugees. In September 2015, in a poll of the Bulgarian sociological agency “Alpha Research”, 63% of Bulgarians consider the refugees a threat to the Bulgarian people. In a survey by “Sova Harris” polling agency from February 2016, refugees pose a threat to the national security for 60% of Bulgarians<sup>8</sup>; 78% of Bulgarians perceive refugees as a burden to the economy, nearly 51% find having a refugee for a co-worker or neighbour is unacceptable (Kopralkova, Slavkova, Tripalo, 2016:3). The survey was commissioned by the Economics and International Relations Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Survey data analysis gives an ambivalent evaluation of the public opinion in general. According to nearly 47% of people the EU should not help refugees seeking asylum on its territory. Among the most frequently quoted arguments are: “alongside refugees, terrorists enter Europe; Bulgaria is a poor state and cannot provide budgets for refugees; Refugees are dangerous and pose a threat to national security; Refugees pose a threat to the EU economy; Refugees have no place in Europe and should seek asylum in the nearest peaceful country in their region instead; Refugees are people with another mentality and religion, and a large number of them cannot adopt the European values and model of behaviour and cannot possibly integrate in the European community; The danger of the spread of Islamism in Europe rises.” (Kyuchukov 2016).

The same survey shows that in favour are only 28% of Bulgarian adult citizens. They believe that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on the territory of Europe: nearly half of the people of this opinion believe it is an act of humanity to help refugees, because they are people in need, seeking refuge from war: “living human beings, having the same necessities and rights as ourselves”; “we have to help each other if we are human” (Kyuchukov 2016). The humanitarian argument is important to emphasise here, to bear in mind later with the analysis of results of the FGIs.

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<sup>8</sup> 63% of the elderly (61+), 63% of people aged 31-50, 59% of people aged 51-60, and 52% of the young (aged 18-30); 70% of residents of regional centres, around 62% of urban residents, 60% of adult population of municipal villages, and 36% of the residents of the capital city.

Another key point is that help should be provided just to the ones who are really in need, implying that many of the ones who come are driven by economic motives: “around one quarter of people who believe that the EU should help refugee seeking asylum on the territory of the latter are of the opinion that there is still a need to restrict the Europebound migration wave – to provide assistance only to refugees of war in the Middle East, to mothers with children and elderly coming from Syria” (Kyuchukov 2016).

The results of this survey show the importance of the religious factor in formation of the negative opinions of people: 34% of adult citizens perceive refugees as a threat for themselves and state that they are afraid of people of a different religion<sup>9</sup>. (Kyuchukov 2016)

Two factors are given why refugees cannot be integrated – (1) economy and (2) culture and religion: “Around 49% of people believe that our state is so weak that it cannot provide conditions for integration of refugees”. And “nearly 39% of adult Bulgarian citizens hold the view that the integration of refugees is impossible, primarily due to the different culture and religion, this precluding in principle their incorporation into our conditions” (Kyuchukov 2016).

The author of the report concludes that: “It is obvious that the scepticism as to the impossibility for integration of refugees stems from concerns that our country’s economy does not allow for providing of care for refugees, rather than from fear of foreign religions, ethnicity, and culture, the migration crisis threatening to further exacerbate social problems”. (Kyuchukov 2016: 8) To what extent this argument is valid for the younger people of the focus groups, will be elaborated in the next part.

The kind of positive conclusion of the author is that the process of fear hasn’t been transferred into hatred: “Bulgarian society is charged with a number of fears towards refugees, yet for the vast majority of the Bulgarian population (with the exception of 5%) these fears have not translated into hatred for foreigners and are free from the burden of xenophobia” (Kyuchukov 2016: 10).

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<sup>9</sup> 28% of them are elderly (over 61), 19% are young (18-30), 18% are aged between 31 and 40, 18% are in the 41-50 age span, and 17% are aged 51-60;

### Public discourse, role of media and civil society

The Amnesty International annual report 2016/2017 for Bulgaria concludes: “Bulgaria failed to provide all required services and access to proper procedures for the rising number of migrants and refugees arriving in the country and failed to address the allegations of summary pushbacks and abuse at the border. A climate of xenophobia and intolerance sharply intensified” (p.96). It alarms that: “in response to Serbia and Hungary increasing their border control measures, the Bulgarian authorities adopted an approach aimed at limiting the number of migrants and refugees entering the country as an alternative route into the EU. Human rights organizations documented frequent allegations of pushbacks, physical abuse and theft by border police. While not openly condoning pushbacks, Prime Minister Borisov conceded that the government had adopted what he termed a “pragmatic approach” to the refugee crisis. He said that over 25,000 people were returned to Turkey and Greece in the period up to August<sup>10</sup>”. (96)

At the same time, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) adds to this point that there are many protests and manifestations that are against the refugees in which hate speech frequently incites violence. In September 2016, for example, people from the Ovcha Kupel district in Sofia made a protest pleading for immediate closure of the refugee centre and “entire extradition of the illegal migrants” (BHC: 81-2). Organisers of the event are several patriotic and far-right parties – VMRO, “Ataka” and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria. The protesters used slogans as “the aliens out” and “we do not want you here”. The minister of interior Romyana Bachvarova stated that radical groups are causing these tensions in the district of Ovcha Kupel – there was information in the Directorate of Interior that two groups of far-right nationalists and skinheads are trying to fight with migrants in several places in the capital (BHC: 81-2)

The study “Hate speech in Bulgaria: risk zones, vulnerable objects” done by Media democracy foundation and Centre for modernization of policies foundation in 2016 concludes that: “Internet is the most risky environment for spreading hate speech. Online nationalism is not limited to Facebook, video-social networks, isolated blogs, or specialized sites that are mainly read by admirers; it is also very well represented in poorly moderated forums to the most influential media”. The research among 30 journalists shows that the most often reported usages of hate speech are made by Alfa and SKAT party TV channels,

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<sup>10</sup> 2016

Pik and Blitz information sites, Weekend, Trud, Telegraph newspapers. There also are references to the leading television networks, bTV and Nova TV, which are considered a conductor of hate speech through their choice of guests. The survey points out that aggressive speech against refugees has been on the rise since the beginning of 2016, and they “continue to be presented as a broad-spectrum threat - demographic, cultural, religious, as well as disease and disease carriers.”

To create a negative atmosphere the following techniques and strategies are pointed out in the study, also reported by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee:

Open calls for violence: “Death to ...!”, “NO to ...!”, “Lynch for ...!”, “... to soap!”.

Expressing superiority to the attacked object: reprisals in “savage”, “primitiveness” and “backwardness”.

Mockery: analogies with examples of popular culture (“aliens”, “orcs”) or the animal world (“monkeys”, “pigs”, “mice”).

Security threats: Unwanted entities are portrayed as “aggressors”, “invaders”, “scourge”, “terrorists”.

Allegations of a negative impact on society: oppositions of ethnic minority/immigrants, on the one hand, against pensioners, children, sick, on the other (BHC: 77-8).

The study’s underling argument is that “the negative attitudes towards the refugees are interpreted by the fear of the stranger that is supported by the lack of adequate information from the state institutions. The foreign-policy conflicts and terrorism also intensify the fear. Particularly painful for the Bulgarian society is the sense of the unfair distribution of state resources” (BHC: 91).

## **PART TWO: FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEWS**

### **Experience with refugees and other migrants**

As already mentioned, in two of the chosen localities (Sofia and Harmanli), the local population had more chances to be exposed to refugee and migrant experiences, and in Belene the local population had recent rather negative experience with one Syrian refugee family. This part will elaborate the situation in each of the locations separately and then common tendencies and differences will be analysed. The order in which the places are discussed follows the chronological order in which the FGIs happened.

Belene is described by the young people, who took part in the first focus group interview, as a “closed community”, “closed town”, although after some reflection they enumerated that there are Russian women married to Belene men living in the town. The hospital manager is a Ukrainian woman who lives in there for a long time. There also are people of Cuban origin. With all these already settled foreigners the relations are quite normal: “*There is no tension with these foreigners*” says one of the young people. Another one is recalling a memory from the time when the Nuclear power plant (NPP) was built in the town: “*In the 86-7-8, I was little then, I remember, that in the town there were many black people, who worked at NPP, as well as Vietnamese. The black people were Cuban. I think they were accepted then as well, although the regime was a different one.*” These people were part of an industry that was supposed to create more jobs in the town, so they were economically integrated. From the discussion it appeared that the closed town had previous experience with foreigners who were more visible (Cuban, Vietnamese) and not so visible (Russian, Ukrainians), all of them integrated in the labour market.

The town of Belene consists of three major religious communities, Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim. So, this aspect, although not directly elaborated, was mentioned through an explanation given by a young person, concerning the visibility of the Others – that the women of the Muslim community in the town do not wear headscarves “*they also went (emigrated) to Belgium; they come only for the summer to make weddings, baptisms.*” Just one Turkish origin owner of a sewing company had a wife who “*was wearing a headscarf when they came to town.*” Thus, it could be said that although it is not a common practice, the signs and symbols of the different religions had been present and people in the town are familiar with them.

Many people from Belene had also been exposed to different nationalities and cultures due to the fact that they work abroad: “*in every family there is one abroad to support the family, because unemployment in the town is very high*”, “*many women from Belene have worked in Greece, Italy, Germany, England, Spain, Russia*”, “*my father works in Greece for 9 years, everyone is escaping from our town abroad*”, “*people from Belene work at the moment or worked abroad and again they go as seasonal workers*”, “*there is no other way for living*”, “*it is all about money*”. All these arguments show that the unemployment issue is of crucial importance for this small town and becomes an important angle and entry point of discussion when approaching the issue of newcomers

to the town. It could be concluded, that young people and people in general in Belene are familiar with the “Other”, including religious Others and visible Others from the time of the socialist regime. At the same time, there are not many job opportunities, people from the town are pushed to emigrate themselves for having a better life and employment and this issue will be one of the leverages when discussing potential refugee integration in the town.

In Harmanli refugees are “everywhere”. The most usual places are: *“Cafes, parks, shops, only in discos you won’t meet them, because they are not allowed to enter. In the beginning they were allowed, but there were fights, now they start letting them enter again”*. Three of the young people have personal contact with refugees, because of their jobs – working in the school, in a bar and in the reception center. The young girl who works in the school says: *“I have worked with several children. I have met their parents. They had nowhere else to study and they came to our school, I work in the village of Ivanovo. I have worked with kids from Syria, for others I do not have my own opinion. They are very different from us in a positive sense, very cultivated/cultured/civilised, as if, they have lived in another world”*. The boy who worked in a bar explains: *“I had some strong big contacts, because I worked in a bar, we talk with them, they come and sit to drink coffee at the bar. We talked in English with some of them, with some in Bulgarian, they knew some Bulgarian. Those I know are from Syria.”* The boy who works in the reception centre also has neighbours, who are from Syria: *“I have neighbours, they live next to me for a year. We communicate often, I see them. The ones who live here in Harmanli on external address, I know many like that, they are mainly from Syria and Iraq. Afghani people they do not live outside the camp. There are good people, and bad ones.”*

The young people explain that there are differences between the different groups of refugees as well: *“The Syrians are one thing, the Afghani, Iraqi, Pakistani is something different.”*; *“I have seen them, the Syrians are cultivated, well behaving, they listen, the others do what they know. The Syrians are dressed better, behave normally and are educated.”*

*“Older people are more open to them, the young more closed”* says one of the boys and it is explained by another with the argument that *“the adults do not see them so much, as the younger people see them more often”*. *“The most exposed to meeting them are the mothers: mothers, especially mothers. Because the parks are full with refugee men and local mothers with their baby-carriages, this is a little bit unpleasant. You go in the park in search of finding a place where there are no groups of men. There are no empty benches because of them”*.

It is interesting to note that although in Sofia the context reveals a picture of the biggest number of migrant people – both within the already integrated migrant communities and newcomers from the last several years because of the Syrian conflict – the number of contacts is rather small. It can be summarised that while all participants in the focus group had observations and some limited small contacts with migrants/refugees, none of them had contacted them on a regular basis, as was the case with several young people from Harmanli.

Concerning visibility of refugees – both extreme points were discussed – from being very visible, especially in people’s perception, to not visible at all, if you don’t go to particular places in the city. A young boy says: *“They are visible, not only because they are many, but because people are not used to them, and when they see one-two in their minds they are hundreds, that’s why they are visible and because they are different from us. I have seen them playing volleyball on the pavement on Luvov bridge, that is not normal for our surroundings, that’s why they are visible, that’s why we notice them and that’s why we react towards them. The question is different, if there wasn’t so much talk in the media, whether anybody would pay so much attention. Maybe the constant public talking on the issue makes people more attentive and notice things they otherwise wouldn’t see”*.

Refugees might not be noticed at all, if nobody goes to Luvov Bridge: *“they are concentrated at Luvov Bridge, their cafes are there, the places where they meet and there are not only refugees there. It happened to me to wait a friend there at Luvov Bridge and there I saw many different ethnic groups, people of Negroid race, Asian people, Muslim, they all differ a lot. To a certain extent we are used to differentiate only between Bulgarian and Roma people, and sometimes Turks. And when there is such a diversity, the people who come from smaller places, because I have noticed that, people who come from bigger cities, they do not have problem with these people, they are used to seeing unfamiliar people. But the people from the smaller towns, for them this gives a feeling of discomfort and I understand them on one side, on the other personally, I have never paid attention. The concentration of these people makes this fable, how many they are, what big problem they are, etc.”*

Another important input and observation is that people are exposed to the refugee issue mainly through media: *“I do not have a TV and do not read Bul-*

*garian media. I grew up outside Bulgaria, I have always been surrounded by different ethnicities and unless they go chasing each other with choppers, I won't notice them... These areas around Luvov Bridge, Maria Lousia Str, these are places I do not visit and I just don't see them, for me they do not exist, in my world, in my bubble these people do not exist here, I am not exposed to media influence, it is like I do not know what we talk about."*

At the same time, for people who live in the same district they don't seem so many in numbers: *"I am there, but I do not feel that they are so many, I do not feel such a big difference between me and them, between the local and the Arabs in the shop, and the Roma people, for me they are part of the landscape. I am noticing when my acquaintances come in this district from Sofia or other places, there is a shock, the place is looked with a bad eye and there is uneasiness/worry that this place is not safe, but my truth is that at least up to now I haven't felt threatened in any way, neither from the Roma people, nor from the refugees. And for me this is not a troubled area. I live a little bit the upper part, on Simeon Str., on Luvov Bridge the concentration of people is more serious and things could be different, but my feeling is firstly that refugees are not so many and secondly, that they do not represent a real threat for our population".*

Another personal experience, from a couple of years ago, shows that the refugees are not so visible: *"My school was exactly next to the refugee camp in Ovcha Kupel and I have acquaintances who live in the military blocks next to the refugee camp. In general, it is exactly like that, they are not visible, sometimes a family goes in the bus who speak a different language. Of course, people stare at them, but it is not something that unusual. Although I have studies 5 minutes from there, I cannot say, that I have heard about scary places. There is something, from the school, they have complained that there are thefts committed during the night in one of the buildings of the school, once. They assumed that they are the people from the refugee camp. We didn't understand the whole story. In the beginning they were all kinds of people, not only adults, but whole families, then they became only young men and this became a problem, I think, when they became more in Ovcha Kupel and people started being indignant with them."*

A good conclusion makes one of the boys who says: *"The fact that in reality we do not see them, does not mean that we do not have the feeling that they*

*are all around us, created in different artificial ways very often, whether it will be the media, whether it will be a pre-election campaign, that creates fear, we need a kind of evil to unite against, but in real terms, also in numbers, what happens in Bulgaria and also in Europe, the number of refugees is not on that level to actually say that it is a problem.”*

### **Arguments against the reception of refugees**

All young people in the focus group agree that the negative attitudes are formed mainly because of the media and the way how it constructs the negative image of the refugees: “Media makes all look that way and most people are afraid and cannot accept them. It all comes from the media. It is as if media predispose people against the refugees. They show only the bad sides, nothing positive. And people fear, if they come to Belene and such things happen.” In the small Danube town the image of the refugee is connected with the feeling of insecurity of the small place. This insecurity has different drives: the possibility of violence in the small and calm town; the fear that more Others will follow; economic insecurity - lack of possibilities to work for the local ones; social injustice – everything is provided to the newcomers, and different religion.

The insecurity in the small place comes through the news that people see and/or read and start imagining what if, and this “what if” is explained by the following arguments: *“Fear comes from the attacks that happen all over the world”; “Because in the whole world there are attacks”. “Here is a very calm place, people know each other and very often it happens they do not lock their doors.”; “If the town was bigger, no one would feel them”.*

People feel afraid and insecure, because they imagine that after the first ones come, there is a big chance others will follow, and they are not sure whether the refugees won’t cause trouble in the town: *“Others will definitely follow when they see that openness of the local people”; “OK, these who came are a good family, but other will come with them, which are at the other side, who will create conflicts and insecurity”.*

They are really concerned that there are no job opportunities for the locals and many of them have to emigrate to take care of their families: *“What will they do in Belene, there is no work, there is just nothing to offer”; “Here people are forced to go abroad to work”; “There are people who are searching for jobs for years and at the end they go abroad, because they cannot find jobs, and they come here and everything is waiting ready for them”.*

The predominant voices of the young people share the opinion that it is social injustice towards the local people when everything is provided for the newcomers: *“They were given housing and everything because the church had organized everything. There would be others to come to whom it won’t be possible to provide housing, they would start breaking, smashing, grabbing, because everyone wants to feed their family, be it a Bulgarian, or a refugee”*; *“People were annoyed that everything was provided to the refugees and for them - there are no jobs, no one is provided with a free home”*; *“And there is a conflict here, how come that some people will take money and others won’t”*.

Insecurity is driven by religious arguments along the line – the familiar ones we accept, the different ones/the Others – we don’t: *“If Ukrainians come, Russians, from the ex-USSR republics, nobody will be against, because there were such people before. But other religion, you start thinking in a different way, because you can’t guarantee how secure you are”*; *“Muslims, they have a different understanding, they see things differently... you cannot be sure whether this person is a bomber, whether he is radical or not, there is such a fear, there is no way not to feel it. My mother was positive, because she is part of the church community, and we had a big talk with her, you don’t know if the cousins will come, and the cousins of the cousins, and then what, there will be more refugees then, than how many we are, that we are a minority, 2-3 thousand people”*.

Five huge aspects serve as a point of forming negative attitudes towards the refugees in Harmanli: huge number of refugees in the reception centre, compared to the size of the local population of the town; people are afraid of the unknown; different culture; attacks in different European capitals and cities; social injustice that the refugees receive social benefits.

The number of refugees in the reception and registration centre when it was full as in the end of 2016, compared to the size of the local population, is huge in the eyes of the local people, especially because the centre is an open one and refugees can walk freely in the town. The following concerns are shared: *“In general Harmanli is 12-13 thousand inhabitants, because it is progressively diminishing in numbers and 4 thousand people in the camp, gathered in one place, this is one third of the town. When they start going in the town in groups, it seems like you are in Syria, it is full of refugees”*; *“The town is a small one, and we somehow know each other, and those people... he gave all he had, when he left, he put his whole life at stake, here he has nothing to lose, whether he will be killed, whether he will be run over, whether he will escape, everything is put*

*at stake. They walk around with knives. There is one part who are good, these are the families”.*

Another type of concern that is expressed by some of the young people is that local people are afraid because they do not know who these people are: *“The truth is that people do not know what to expect, then they do not know a different culture and they are scared.” “Nobody knows who these people are, 15 people, a group of male, young men, nobody knows who they are, how they have come here, whether they are part of ISIL, nobody knows them. He says some names, when he is caught, but who know who they are.” “What scares the local people is that they are only male, there are no women.”*

The young people in Harmanli note the different culture and everyday life patterns of the newcomers: *“They live in another world, their thinking is different. The way they have lived in their own countries does not have anything in common with ours here. In the camp they were given mattresses, they didn’t use mattresses, they lay on the floor, such things. They have to have fire all the time”; “From Afghanistan come people who make dug-outs, they do not use doors, they take away the doors and put a blanket instead. They have phobias from doors”.*

*Not knowing what to expect and the fear of possible negative situations, coming by these unknown people, is also because of all the attacks that happen in different European cities: “It is normal to be afraid, when you watch the news and in London you see a person with a knife...”.*

*Last, but not least, people take it as an injustice towards the local population that refugees receive benefits and the local people don’t. One of the boys says: “the local people are angry that the state helps them and does not help our pensioners”.*

The drivers of insecurity that lead towards negative attitudes among young people in Sofia are based on the following factors: culture of war and different meaning of life; cultural differences; fear of the unknown; purposeful policy of islamisation of the European continent; profits of the war/crisis – successful business for many.

The long years of war in the countries of origin of the refugees have influenced their meaning of life and this culture of war is a point of insecurity for the local people: *“Refugees come from places where there are civil wars for years now or there were civil wars. These people are used to war, they are used to one way of life and habits, which we do not have. For these people life has*

*a different meaning, because of their life experience all these people can use guns and these people are much more united and this makes people insecure in society. These are the facts, people feel insecure, because they see one community that easily unites and that have the potential to become dangerous”.*

Another type of culture difference that is pointed out in Harmanli and also in Sofia is that refugees, especially men, walk in groups is a threat to the people, especially when they listen what is told in media. Even the more open of the young people have some concerns: *“I met once a person and we had a really nice talk, he started it, the difference was that he is one, and in most cases when people are afraid is that refugees walk in groups”.*

Another aspect to this argument is that these groups of young people are coming in Europe to conquer the continent through a policy of islamisation: *“People are scared, because very often the idea is presented that this is a purposeful policy of islamisation of the continent, and that’s why these groups of young men come here to conquer us”.*

Local people feel insecure exactly because of the predominance of the male refugee population of the refugee groups, a young person explains: *“In my opinion, there is a big difference in the attitudes towards women and men. Towards women, I have never heard, this woman I won’t accept her, but what I have heard and main problem is that three thirds of these people are men, what they would do here, what do they think. ... family somehow is something good, in the moment, they are only men, it becomes an Islamic invasion”.*

This is again connected to the fear of the unknown, expressed eloquently by a young man: *“Who are these people, this is the big problem, because people are scared, because they do not know who these people are, because nobody said that these people are investigated, that we assume that these people are not killers and especially one photo to be shown of a person who holds a be-headed head and to show him very calm hugging his family, this is what brings this chaos. The state policy in this sphere and in general at a European level, I am a liberal, but for me this is extremely irresponsible. These people to be let in, because today we live in a kind of an extreme phase of politics of ethics, without any professional rational thought and when it is made without rational thought people cannot be sure/secure and this gives a huge ground for populism to step in”.*

As in both Belene and Harmanli, the argument of the social injustice is voiced in Sofia from a different perspective: *“We work and we pay taxes, and*

these 1300 leva, whatever the sum is, these money, if you ask me, I do not want a single penny to go in that direction, I want my taxes to be used for education, health care, I do not want them to be used to feed these people”.

Table 3: Drivers of insecurity and negative attitudes

Belene	Harmanli	Sofia
Possible violence – attack in many European cities	Number of refugees	Culture of war and different meaning of life
Others will follow	Fear of the unknown	Different culture
Economic insecurity	Different culture	Purposeful policy of islamisation
Social injustice	Attacks in many European cities	Fear of the unknown
Different religion	Social injustice	Social injustice

The table above shows the predominant drivers of insecurity and fears in the three locations, that when being unaddressed, serve as a basis for negative attitudes formation among the people. It is interesting to observe and note that although similar in general, all the three locations have their specifics, based on the experiences of people. This observation is strongly supported by the key conclusions from a recent study in UK focused on understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants:

Engaging effectively with public attitudes towards refugees and migrants requires understanding the real world concerns, emotions and values around which attitudes are formed.

These efforts work best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts, and the nuances of public attitudes within them (Dempster and Hargrave 2017).

A deeper reflection could give reasoning to each of these findings: refugees seen as taking non-existent jobs in Belene; the number of refugees in Harmanli; the policy of Islamization in Sofia, the capital, where policy is made, etc.

### Sources of information

A recent survey of Eurobarometer shows that Bulgaria is the third in the EU after Finland and Portugal to have trust in media: “There are only three countries in which a majority of respondents tend to trust the media: Finland (61%), Portugal (57%), and Bulgaria (48%)” (Special Eurobarometer: 15). These results support the findings on the opinions of the young people in the smaller towns in Bulgaria, as was the case with the FGI in Belene and Harmanli. Most young

people in both towns stated that they do not check the information they get from the media, either traditional or social media.

In Belene FGI most of the young people get informed reading online news sites like: novinite.bg, vesti.bg, profit.bg. One of them states that she does not follow the discussions because they are disturbing life in general: *“I came across some things in Facebook, TV, but in general I am trying to avoid such things, to live peacefully”*.

The inhabitants of the town have their Facebook group that is called “Belenchani” and all that happens in the city is reflected there: *“it is known, if the news is in the group, the info is not checked, the scandal starts immediately”, “true or false you start digging/commenting”; “it is easy to write opinions there, it is more difficult to express them directly”*. When the Syrian family arrived in town some of the young people say that there were insulting comments in FB about them like: *“where those people come from”, “we don’t want them”, “let them go away”*. At the same time another boy says that this situation was just for a little while: *“The rhythm of the town was not interrupted. They were just gossiping for two weeks”, “The people went away and all finished”*.

At the same time, when the protest was reported in the news of bTV and Nova Television, the young people are outraged that Belenchani were classified as intolerant: *“in fact we from Belene are very tolerant, we accept the different, but the situation itself was negative and against the acts of the priest”*. The young people were unhappy with the fact that: *“Media put a common denominator to all people in Belene. They emphasised only on the negative. One fast interview with the priest in the church. The reporting in front of the Municipality cut, not giving the real situation, “distorted”*.

According to their interpretation, the whole situation in the town happened because of the priest who invited the refugee family and didn’t inform the public and the local authorities when exactly they were expected to come, thus the people of the town were not prepared, nobody asked them about their opinion. The “local scandal” was much more against the priest, rather than against the refugees themselves, most of the young people agree about.

And although they explain that *“Media make sensations even from the smallest things, they exaggerate and don’t have anything in common with reality,”* when asked whether they check the information from different sources, they said that: *“Nobody really questions and checks the information further”*.

The young people with more positive opinion about the refugees raise a question like: *“why did media make predominantly negative news that is a bit*

*strange, because there are good people too and we could see something good in them”.*

Pretty similar is the situation in Harmanli, where when asked what they read, all young people agree that they follow the local online channel: Sacar News<sup>11</sup> and when these are news that are about the town, they say there is even no need to read about it, because they spread easy and much of the things people learn from personal observation in public places. People understand the fact that most of the news are exaggerated, and also that some of the information that comes from the refugees themselves is a lie, giving the example that: *“Most of them have money, they lie they don’t have any, but after that they give the smugglers 4-5 thousand Euro to take them outside Bulgaria.”* For some of the big discussions in the town, as the revolt that happened on 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2016 in the camp, when there was infection spread throughout the camp, one of the young people who already works there said: *“I work there since recently, when the revolt happened, sometime before I was seeing the wounds, when it was talked that there is an infection, they were visible on the hands, everywhere.”* And one other added that: *“Yes, there is no need for a direct contact to notice.”*

The sources of information that are used by young people in Sofia differ a lot, due to the fact that nearly all say that international news are more important for them and they read various international newspapers. Some of the young people do not read Bulgarian newspapers at all, neither watch national TV: *“Bulgarian media I do not read, Capital, but only business related topics, otherwise The Daily Mail, I like it a lot, because of its entertaining character, comic; the Economist, Politico, Russia Today, everything, I am exposed to it all.”*

When the situation with refugees escalated, one of the boys said that he asked Google about what a refugee is. Another one used as a source of information her family and friends, two others had professional reasons to be familiar with the topic (studied law, worked for the European institutions): *“Because of my work for the European commission and the Council of Europe, but distantly I knew about the refugees but only on a theoretical level, up to several months ago, when I moved back to Sofia”.* A boy says that: *“When the discussions increased in the society, in the media, I was fed up of people who talk nonsense, so I read the law, about the different types of refugee statuses, what these people go through, thus I can understand what is talked about, the huge*

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<sup>11</sup> <http://sakarnews.info/>

<sup>22</sup> [The wages of fear](#)

*stream of information that is pouring in the public space”.*

A big difference between the young people in Sofia, compared to the ones in Belene and Harmanli, is that they do not easily trust what they read in media and question the news, verifying the information by reading different sources, or relying to the opinion of other prestigious professionals in the field (professors for example). A young boy says: *“It is very important to say, that I do not believe none of them, all of them I put through the sieve of the people whom I trust, for example, professor Ditchev”.* Another opinion, covering the necessity of more academic approach, is given by a boy who says: *“If news become populist and it is heard, I try to inform myself from more academic persons like Noam Chomski or Zizek”.*

Another point, made by several of the young people in Sofia, is that they like to compare the information coming from various sources, covering the whole spectrum of political opinions from the right to the left: *“I read Capital, because they write different things from the media of Peeveski; Terminal 3 talk gammon but nobody else talks this gammon, so a person can compare. Marginalia, from time to time, to see the extreme liberal views, but I do not read right media”.* Another boy with a similar opinion says: *“For everyday news I mainly read Dnevnik and Capital, but when I have more time I try to check everything, and I mean also Pik and Blitz, because I think it is important to see the various extremes, offnews as well, I also like to read Marginalia very much, not because I like them, but because it is interesting for me to see how far they will go and what will they write. I like to read right media too, Ekip, now Misal started, because you see a different point of view. In general, my opinion is there is no need to limit ourselves, of course, I approach [media] very critically. I think that each media presents an extreme point of view, except the national ones that are trying to balance. I also like to read some people on Facebook. In my opinion, it is important to observe the two extremes, how far they have gone, because the national media are balanced and they say everyday things, and the extreme of the other media are those that try to influence a change of the public opinion, so I do not limit myself”.*

A young lady explains the benefits of the algorithms of Facebook: *“I am very grateful to the algorithms of Facebook honestly and because they create this pleasant feeling of a bubble where you are among your people, and life is sometimes pink, etc., but otherwise, having a broad range of friends, you can see in your feed absolutely polar opinions and absolutely polar quotes and sharings,*

*and thus, on one hand you see this media in which range it is, and see different points of view, whether with comments below or with comments of the sharing. Bulgarian media to open in the morning with the coffee, I rarely open Bulgarian median in the morning with my coffee do. If I do, it is with the Econo-media circle, from the others I follow people who are much more conservative than me and I have people who are more liberal than I am, and I am curious what they share in particular moments, if they both share the same thing, then this is a must read, something very interesting must have happened.”*

Other sources of information could be more artistic: *“To inform myself from more artistic acts as installations or films, for example the movie the Salt of the Earth. The popular news you hear in one way or another. I do not follow anything strictly”*. A girl says that: *“For some time, I do not follow any media. If there is an issue I would like to learn about, I search for it, otherwise mainly from Facebook, there are many interesting news [?] that I can find”*.

Starting from the last comment, there are people in all three places who do not follow any media, and just inform themselves about issues important to them when necessary. Another observation that is really important to emphasize, is the local character of the news and social media (the local FB group in Belene, the local online news provider) read in the small towns and more diverse in the capital.

### **Attitudes towards hate speech and violence against refugees**

The good news is that in none of the locations where the FGIs took place, there weren't many situations in which violence was reported by the young people. In the case of Belene, a violent fight from the past was remembered by the young people, in Harmanli, two situations were reported – a fight in a bar between two groups of refugees, one of them Syrians, the other most probably Kurds, and the other situation was in-between a Roma person and some refugees, who were fighting for a prostitute in the centre of the town. In Sofia, the young people also have heard about situations only of intergroup conflicts.

Beside that, in both Belene and Harmanli significant events happened that heated the debates including the use of hate speech. In Belene this was the protest organised on 7th of March 2017 and in Harmanli this was the revolt in the reception centre on 24th of November 2016.

In Belene the protest situation is explained by the young people as a made-up one, organised in a hurry in Facebook on the day of the protest: *“in the morning they said, tonight in 7:30 pm in front of the Municipality”*. None of the

participants of the focus group took part in this protest, one of them passed by the Municipality, but didn't find out what was happening, and some of them heard from the news the day after: *"I understood about the protest on the following day, when I saw the reporting in the news, I noticed that the people first wished the priest to go, secondly, they were afraid of the Syrian refugees, they are afraid that they will impose their faith, if I remember correctly"*.

The protest is described as follows: *"There was a staged protest, it was more political"; "In the media it was presented as a big protest, in reality they were 20 people, from which 10 were from the party, supported by 2-3 people more. They have organized it, Peter Dulev did it. He asked one or two to express opinion. Me personally, because with my colleague we work in the Municipality, I go to the council meetings, the man himself who organized the protest, he was in support of the refugees, and then all of a sudden, because it was in front of the media – against. You see him behind the camera, socialist, socialist, socialist and Krasi... our man. And the protest shown on TV was a complete invention/a lie."* The young people say that there were no slogans in general, although some of the things said were insulting, especially from a young person with a Russian flag.

Regarding the purpose of the protest, one of the young people says: *"I have heard that the protest is organized for the refugees to leave, but it was more against the priest, that he hasn't asked the people whether they agree to accept the refugees."* In society, the young people say that *"there were some people who were firmly against the refugees"*. According to some of the young persons, there were people who were defending the refugees, the whole town was divided in "pro" and "contra": *"There were no hesitant people, either you are for or against". "My mother was personally "for", because she was part of the community, in the church. The problem started because the priest didn't inform, the whole town didn't know that this is expected and this is how this whole scandal started, in which the town divided in "for" and "against". And as far as it is spoken, those who were "against" are not as much "against", but that they were not informed. Those who go to the church, they knew because this was talked a lot there as an idea. This is how the whole trouble started."*

The situation in Belene should be understood and analysed in the larger national political context. The beginning of March 2017 was right before the parliamentary elections, when most political parties were intensively using

the “refugee threat” for their parties’ benefits.

In Harmanli, as mentioned above, the fights known to the young people were between some refugees groups in a disco and between refugees and a Roma man for a prostitute. About the intergroup conflict a boy said: *“I have seen them insult each other because of their race among themselves; some of them were Kurds, the others I do not know what and fought because of their race. They have gathered in front of the bar and they wanted to fight, I don’t remember was there a fight in the end, the situation was serious”*.

They all agree that *“The first Syrians were the best. Now there are no Syrians, there are Kurds”*. The general opinion in the town towards the Syrians is positive: *“The people in the town are not so much against the Syrians, but the Afghans, they do not want them. There are many Syrians who live in apartments in the town, some of them work, some have shops. The people got used to them”*. Rather negative is the opinion about the Afghan people: *“In a small city like ours they have to be better distributed, for example, if there is one group of Syrians here, the Afghan somewhere else, not to put them together, because there are problems in the camp, they don’t really love each other. The two cultures, Syria and Afghanistan, they don’t love each other. Now they are separated, but before they were in common halls, for example one Syrian room, the other of Afghans, every night there was a fight. The Afghans are most of them men; there are women among the Syrians too”*. When asked about what kind of insulting words they have heard about the refugees, the joint answer was Gypsies.

The rebellion that happened in the camp is considered as the event that provoked many discussions, not only in the town, but in Bulgaria as a whole. One of the boys explains how the people in the reception centre have felt the situation from inside the camp: *“My sister, she worked there since 25 days, and she called me, I was having a coffee in the centre at that time, she called me, and she was crying, she talked with great difficulty, they have escaped literally, from the back side, from the forest, because at one moment the situation got terrible. She told me that they have started striking at lunch time and then at one moment they went to the administration, there was not much police at that time there was no gendarmerie at that time. And they were told that police will come in 40 min. and nobody comes, and the refugees are coming to the administration building, and you see them they come with stones, stakes and they (workers in the camp) managed to escape behind the administration build-*

ing, at that time the camp was not surrounded with those walls and thanks that there were Syrian women and Afghan women and they made a human chain between their people and the administration, this helped a lot in the first moment. Even they have teared the clothes of some of their women, but they were stopped. The women have seen what is happening and they have said that these people from the administration they are not to blame for the situation”.

From the answers of the young people, it is understood that they are not very aware of what is going on in the reception centre. When asked why the rebellion started, one of the young people says: *“It was because of these wounds”; “There were rumours in town they were under quarantine, because they were all in wounds and they have to be examined thoroughly, and they revolted”*.

When discussing the rebellion, the young people got very concerned about the number of the people: *“Why they have put two thousand Afghan people together on one spot, the revolt was mainly from people from Afghanistan, the Syrians didn’t go out”*. The young man, who currently works in the reception centre, explains that he has talked with the guard, who was on duty on that day in the Syrian building: *“he told me how he saw the Afghan people going out, and when the revolt started, at one moment you see how they come back with staffs and who hasn’t went out from among the Afghan men, they pushed them to go out”*. What was visible for all people in the town is that they made fire: *“It was at lunch time when the fire was lighted”*. One of the young people explains why all this happened saying: *“Because somebody hasn’t done his job somewhere. Because the organiser who was caught afterwards, he was caught before in Germany, he was in jail for sometimes there, he has done something in Macedonia, then deported to Afghanistan, then he went again, came here, he behaved very arrogantly and the situation was misjudged. If only measures were taken on time”*.

News spread very fast through Facebook, photos were also shown. The people in the town got really scared, *“if all these people come out”*. They explained that due to the good work of the policemen the situation was managed: *“the policemen, 40 people, they managed to handle the situation, because if all these people would have gone outside, so many people to go in the town, something more serious would have happened”*.

All the young people agreed that *“That’s why in a small town there should be no 4 thousand people, who do nothing and go out freely in the centre, and with the psychosis created, who would let their children go out in the centre alone”*.

The young people in Sofia do not know about conflicts between refugees and local people. One of the boys says: *“I have the feeling that the aliens themselves have conflicts among themselves, they also feel guests here, and I don’t think they would start a fight with the local people, whether the local people provoke them in a certain way, this is another question.”* The intergroup conflicts were explained by the young people in Sofia with culture arguments: *“They carry this from their countries; they do it there, come here and continue doing it.”*

If there is aggression from the side of the Bulgarians it is explained as a passive one: *“There is a feeling of aggression from the Bulgarians towards the refugees. It is in the form of sharing opinions, but it could be so extreme that could be categorised as a factor”.* The way how Bulgarian people approach and form attitudes towards the refugees is explained as follows: *“People are not so happy with their life and when they see somebody who is weaker, being a refugee, it is clear, that he does not come here, for making conflicts, because in 99% of the cases he comes to stay here day or two, by the time he is transferred through the border, he has no interest to enter conflicts, because that might hinder their departure”.* Another explanation tackling again the economic factor and the poor conditions of the Bulgarians is explained by another young person saying *“people work to earn money, pay taxes, there are people who live with little money per day. When on TV it is said that a refugee costs 1300 leva, and a man has 5 leva in his pocket for the day and when they see the refugees at the dinner place on Luvov Bridge and his first reaction is maybe to confront, and most people they do not have the courage to go to talk personally, but they talk among themselves, this is their right, I wouldn’t classify it as aggression, because it is their right not to like somebody, to the extent they do not go to beat him, and the question is that from word to word, from a man to another, this becomes a common national characteristic. For example, I travel a lot in the country, I was recently in a village in the region of Varna, where there are no refugees, there are no Gypsies, no Turks, people live there, work, survive and you go there, ask him how he is and he starts explaining – ‘end, the state is over, the hordes are here, hordes they call them, hordes flooded us’. And some apocalyptic views about the future and this influences their lives, because they talk this when they see the other people in the village.”* A conclusion, that supports the results of the FGI in Belene as well, is summarised by the same young person in Sofia as follows: *“Very interesting phenomenon is that the*

*anti-refugee attitudes are there, where refugees are not present at all.”*

Young people in Sofia have heard the following insulting words: Gypsies, invaders, turbans, all things that show that they are different, Hordes, Orcs. One of the girls explains how some people draw parallels with the Ottoman invasion: *“People associate this invasion with the Ottoman invasion, in fact many parallels are made, which are not so adequate, at least according to my observations”*.

When talking about violence and hate speech, all the young people in the three locations reported as observers, rather than being part of the actions associated with aggression or hatred. Their stance towards the opinions and information provided remained more neutral or with concern with the Bulgarian people and their attitudes. Only in Sofia by two of the participants the refugees were referred to as “aliens” when stories were revealed, but not in all cases with negative connotation.

It is interesting to note that none of the young people in Harmanli mentioned at all the number of Afghan people arrested after the revolt and the photos showing how they were beaten by the police in the barracks that were widely spread through various Facebook groups.

Response to pro-refugee arguments

In all three locations the positive stories and pro-refugee arguments were the hardest to evoke but with potential to manifest both through more idealistic, but also pragmatic and concrete ideas.

In Belene, arguments connected with humanity were used that *“we have to be people first and not to look at the ethnicity and nationality”*; that the family, they were searching security too: *“Everyone deserves to be safe, to be protected in some way”*; *“I was thinking that these people were a good family and we chased them out. From a human point of view, this is bad”*; *“They are escaping war, they run away from the worst, they come here, people here are negative and chase them, the situation is not pleasant.”*

In Harmanli most open and positive arguments were given by the girl who works in the school and had longer and positive contacts with children and parents: *“I think when a person enters among them, he/she changes his/her mind. Because all I heard up to now were town legends. Maybe most of the people in the town didn’t encounter this, but maybe they have heard from an acquaintance, friend, brother, sister, and these things are spread in town, because from the mouth of most of the people it sounds the same, and this*

*is somehow mostly outside, and when you enter, when you get to know one, two, five, ten people, I am far away from the thought that all of them are good, perfect, they come here, want to work, but see now, we have to take care about them. I don't know, maybe because I have encountered them, I have a different opinion. Mine is also not reliable, because I do not know Afghan people at all".*

Another positive story about opinion that was changed from negative to positive because of personal contacts and knowing more about the real stories of the people, is shared by a boy: *"Before, when I didn't have much contact, I was firmly against them, but now, when I have talked with many Syrian people and know their stories. There is a girl in the camp that works with the psychologist, four days she was held by ISIL, she passed through brutal things during these four days, here she has made a suicide attempt. Another boy, two of his fingers are cut, these are people who run away from the war, some other run away from calmer regions, but they say that there is nothing to do there. You can live like that 5-6 months up to one year, it is a chance whether you will live or die. In Afghanistan, there is no war now, but there are the talibans, the aftermaths of the war. Here there are also Pakistani people, Iraqi, Somali people".*

The positive impact on the economy of the city sounds like a sad joke: *"In general, everybody makes money from them. Some make marriages, others find addresses for them. This is widely discussed and it is not illegal, because nobody looks after them".* Two ways to gain profit are the fake marriages (*"There are fake marriages, it is only because of the marriage, there is no love there. I have heard these fake marriages cost 4-5 thousand Euro".* *"There are girls who want money and they find Syrian boyfriends. I have a colleague who married a Syrian")* and fake addresses (*"A family of five after receiving 3 years status, has to leave the camp within a month, for 5 years status, again up to one month they have to leave the camp. They have to find an address outside the camp to issue them identity cards for refugees. To have an external address somebody just sells them an address, they may sign a contract for the rent for two months and takes 10 Euro each, and they take like that net money"; "If you have a house, 100 square metres, you can register not more than 9-10 people, if the house belongs to a woman, she takes 50-60 leva each, the rest is taken by the one who makes the deal".*)

Due to the high number of fake addresses it is mentioned with a kind of pride that Harmanli is the only town that grew progressively *"with three thousand" and "that's why they have increased the number of the city council of*

*Harmanli, but this is fake, because they take the address, the identity card and escape”.*

This naturally brings the issue of integration – most of the young people agree that: *“They (refugees) see Bulgaria as something temporary, not permanent”; “In reality they are not here for that. Either they want to go to Western Europe or want to go home, all to be over and to go back home”.* Some exceptions are also mentioned: *“I have a colleague who is Syrian, he is here since 2013 and he lives here with his wife who is British in one village nearby. All his relatives, his brother is in Germany, he is here because of this wife”.* Economic argument is also given regarding the small salaries in the town and the high rents: *“Who will stay in Harmanli with 500 leva salary and 400 leva rent”.* But also one of the young people explains that there is nothing done for making these people stay, like for example learning Bulgarian language (*“Nobody provides Bulgarian lessons”; “First they need to be thought Bulgarian, I would be pleased, if somebody who is here since two weeks in Bulgaria and knows some words in Bulgarian”.*) and not so many opportunities to work (*“At the moment, I think there are three Afghan women who work in one Turkish firm, sewing company. I see them every morning when they go to work”.*)

Several other arguments were given about how refugees directly support the economy of the town, beside shopping food, clothes, mobile phones, they go to Internet centres. As a positive result of the high number of people in the refugee centre (4 thousand) *“our Lidl became the third in business in Bulgaria”.* Besides that, job opportunities were created in the refugee centre for Bulgarians: *“many people work in the camp. On the one hand many people protest, but if the camp is not there, many local people work there. There is administration, guards, cleaners”.*

A positive aspect of learning about each-other’s culture was explained by the school teacher: *“Nur (a Syrian girl who studies in the school) taught the kids Syrian dances, they thought her Bulgarian ones in exchange. When they are kids, it is very nice, very pure, to look at them from aside. The mother of Nur works in a restaurant, they make things at home, and she was bringing to the kids to try. This starts when they have more time together, and in the school they are all day together. When they are adults I do not know how this could happen”; “What we face is that there are children who want to study, but they are stopped because of different reasons, documents, etc. or for example, now a girl who is 15 to be in second grade, they have returned her.”*

The barriers of integration are represented by the reaction of the pensioners: “the retired people for example, with 160 leva pensions, they won’t agree” and of the local authority: *“The local authority would score an own-goal, because people don’t want them”*.

In Sofia the human approach was also one of the first ones to mention, looking at the *“people as individuals and emphasising on the human factor, doesn’t support the idea that these are hordes, who come to conquer Europe”*, following the stance of prof. Ivaylo Ditchev.

An interesting observation was given, that the people who defend refugees in all cases are to be blamed, because their labelling the ones of a different opinion as “extremists” does not help to attract supporters for the refugee cause and make them change their mind: *“There are people, who defend the refugees in all cases, even when they should not be defended, some separate cases, the problem is that these people who are “for” accepting refugees, usually they are very extreme and this repels the people, they do not give a suggestion that is well augmented, they just say that we have to accept these people, but firstly, we cannot accept all these people, and secondly, to accept some people without having a clue what to do with them afterwards is not serious and that’s why these people who talk like Ditchev that we have to accept the refugees and talk about solidarity, we don’t have to forget that these people, they irritate the other part, because they say that we have to accept the refugees and at the same time they talk that we are racist, nationalists and all other unpleasant characteristics and in fact they do exactly the opposite. Instead of trying to attract the attention of the person, who has prejudices towards the refugees, and make them think how they can help, they act extremely negatively. That’s why in my opinion the fact that in Bulgaria there are many people with negative opinions towards the refugees is because of the people who defend the refugees, because most of them are just very extreme and talk inadequately”*.

Another argument that was not used in the other two locations was that Bulgaria has international obligations, because of signing the Geneva Convention in 1993: *“Here are intertwined the social and the functional perspectives, because it is one thing to have international obligations in general, as international community to accept refugees that are in this situation without having control on the situation, and another thing is how we functionally look at these people, whether attempts are made in Merkel style to integrate them in an ag-*

ing society which has progressing demographic crisis. And in my opinion, it is very important to make this distinction, because it is one thing to perceive this model that we as people, part of the international community, have to accept these people, another thing is an action plan once they are here, and not to say, no, no, we cannot accept you, because we don't need you".

Other arguments that go in the direction that Bulgaria has obligations and responsibility towards what is going on in the Middle East, is explained by one of the boys: "We have some responsibility for the civil war in Syria. Maybe not that much as other states, but the West has responsibility, because of pure economic reasons, and military interests. So, we can do something good in return" and "We produce weapons with which people shoot each other there".

Regarding integration, all young people in Sofia agree that: "labour integration leads to integration in society and for this society to should start accepting them." Possibility for friendships was expressed when isolation is overcome through establishing places to meet: "these people are isolated; there is no way to meet them and to become friends, maybe, if they were part of our everyday life in a way, we might become very good friends".

#### **Other, country specific issues**

A specific issue that appeared to be of high importance in the Bulgarian context, especially for the young people in the smaller towns, is the need to improve the critical thinking skills of the younger generation towards using various kinds of media, both traditional and social. Questioning news, finding diverse and reliable sources, verifying the information, building one's opinion based on various sources, etc. are crucial when forming one's opinion.

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, GOOD PRACTICES

The study shows that the young people in all three locations have more arguments in line with the general fears expressed and rather weaker arguments in favour of supporting refugees (human approach). The pragmatic approach is also seen as one of the ways how to handle the refugee situation. Several recommendations are important to mention:

General and specific fears need to be faced, understood and approached on local level. For example, the case of Belene shows the importance of the unemployment issue in the town, it means that this should be discussed publicly along with possible solutions in regard to how newcomers could contribute to the labour market instead of letting the discourse of stealing one's job to prevail. Concrete ideas, given by the young people, are as follows:

Public debates, based on facts, are seen as a possibility to influence and even change more negative opinions: "There is a need for public debates, based on facts, and there are several important questions, firstly, how many refugees we could accept, secondly, after accepting them how many we can integrate, when saying integration I mean to integrate in the labour market, this is very important, so that they are able to take care about themselves, so the second generation to be integrated as well in our society".

Understanding the complexity of the situation: "We need to look at the situation in a complex way, to search for global, not only local decisions and to think long-term. Syria, ISIL, refugees are connected and we have to look holistically, not only that refugees are coming".

Information sessions for both refugees and local population: "Refugees should be informed, they should have access to information, trainings, etc. but local people should become a bit more understanding of the culture of the people that come from a country X, that Islam in general is not a religion that preaches death, polygamy, etc., that it is just one way to interpret this religion and this is done by a small number of Muslims, the information should come from both sides".

Places for encounters: "There should be events, there are so many community centres, there are so many places, where these people can show their culture, this is done now by liberal organizations, in small numbers, they do not have access to the grandmothers in the villages, to show that these are normal people, who can cook something tasty, the locals will do something local, and this is it".

When reflecting on these concrete ideas, the conclusion of the already mentioned recent study in the UK should be taken in consideration. It says that myth-busting through providing facts about refugees is not enough. This statement is supported by the FGIs, for example, some of the young people in Sofia say that being more educated does not mean to be more tolerant towards the Other: “In my opinion having a Master degree in a subject does not make you in reality more tolerant. What makes you more tolerant is you yourself to distinguish between a homogeneous group, that to a huge extent exists in your mind and that this mass of people consists of individuals. And this happens when you yourself open towards these people, and not to read huge amounts of information about the topic X, which explains why there is a big wave of intolerance among young people with education, because education is not a factor in itself”.

More empathy: Stepping in the shoes of the Other is the only possible way of changing one’s opinion. A girl from Belene says: “My position has always been negative, but I can imagine, if I have to go abroad with my family and we are exactly in the same way outcast by the local people, maybe if I put myself in their place, maybe that would change my position for this family who has come to Belene. Otherwise in general, I do not approve the presence of refugees in whole Bulgaria”.

Personal encounters, personal approach, personal stories: the actual meetings show to be the most direct way to change opinion, as the young people who have had the chance to interact, to talk and work with refugees, were the ones who had the most positive arguments. Young people know about other young people who have integrated in the labour market because of their knowledge and skills: “I have heard, a friend of mine has two refugees in his firm, and they work pretty decently, they do not distinguish them from the others, it is an IT firm. So, there are educated people who can contribute to the labour market”. A very inspiring question was posed by one of the boys in Sofia: “It is more important to ask ourselves what we can do”, supported by a girl in Sofia: “The whole problem comes from the personal attitude of the people, people do not try to be better, more human, to look at these people as people, to say to yourself, look, I can be in this situation as well... nobody is more human than the other, sad but true.” In the same direction were the concrete suggestions by a girl in Harmanli: “These people who are here from the first wave, there are people who really want to stay here, maybe there is a way they

to get to know the local people better, maybe kind of meetings, maybe also some local people would like to ask them something. In reality we do not have communication with them. Most people do not know anything about them; they watch from aside, they listen to what they are told. If the Bulgarians get to know the situation better, it might be that they would accept them differently”, supported by a personal commitment from a boy in Harmanli: “If something depends on me, I will help, it depends on the situation, what I can do for that person.” A powerful message was given by another boy in Sofia, who was telling about a personal encounter that surprised him positively: “We entered once in an Arab coffee shop and it was extremely pleasant, they looked strange at us like stray rabbits, we looked differently and spoke in a different language, but in fact they invited us to black tea and this was extremely nice, I was extraordinary shocked by this, because we had a very human encounter, you won’t go anywhere today where you are offered something for free today. They were very welcoming, because the friend I was there with, she speaks Arabic and this predisposes. It is one thing to look them from the outside, another thing to look them from inside, there is a difference.”

Pragmatic approach: “The question is to disregard from what is typical political discourse and pure political talking and planting certain opinions and attitudes by people who have an interest ensuing from such opinions and attitudes to have some benefits out of this, and to look at the situation in a more simple way – who is who, yes, there is a conflict, there are people who flee because of this conflict, yes, there are people who do not flee because of this conflict and pretend to do so, and to act in a way that is optimal”.

Cannot help all: “And the most important in my opinion is to become aware that we cannot help all, because these are many people, because if we strive to help all of them, we won’t help anybody, to be human, we have to approach everybody individually and responsibly, because the most important is not emotionally to say, that you want to help, but to help in reality, and this happens not with emotions, but with a plan”.

“It all starts with the kids”: one of the participants being a teacher believes that for the ones who wish integration, it is possible and it starts with the kids: “For me the integration starts from the kids, they will gather together, the adults afterwards.”

Create an environment so the ones who want to contribute have the chance to do: “There are people who would like to contribute, but it is very difficult if

the surrounding/the environment is completely negative towards you”. At the same time: “These who are contributing are rare cases... you cannot go in a foreign country and to become part without making at least a bit of compromise with your personal point of view”.

Each side to be ready to give up something from their culture/religion: “The cultural specificities are something that can be modified if the two communities are willing.”; “The cultural and religious barriers to integration are before the economic ones of whoever anyone is, wherever anyone goes”; “Europeans are atheists and when you are coming with your culture and you are not just religious Muslim, but you manifest all the symbols, you are rejected by the society. Europeans are afraid from religious people. I am generalising, over-exaggerating, but there is no chance for you to integrate, if you hold tightly on your religion, if you hold your culture to such an extent that it discerns you from the local people”.

All these arguments go in the direction that to open means to lose something and to lose something from who you are and gain something new, means to change.

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