

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Bulgaria

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

- [The Refugee Project](#) started in 2010 as an initiative of [CVS-Bulgaria](#) and became a joint project with [Caritas Sofia](#) in 2011. It provides educational assistance and a range of activities for refugee children and adults in all three reception centres of the State Agency for Refugees in Sofia, including language classes and computer lessons, sport activities, music, cookery and art activities, parties, games and excursions. Since 2010, over 300 volunteers have participated in the project as teachers, mentors or facilitators. The main partner of the project is the State Agency for Refugees. Other partners are international organisations such as UNHCR and UNICEF as well as national NGOs. In December 2014, the president of Bulgaria awarded The Refugee Project as ['Volunteer Initiative of the Year'](#) in Bulgaria. It was also [featured as good practice](#) on EWSI.
- [Colored Glasses](#) – a project of ['Youth for Understanding' Foundation](#) – offers ready-to-use workshops on intercultural learning at secondary schools since 2010. The objectives of these workshops are to inform young people about the concept and to raise awareness on problems caused by intolerance. 60 workshops have been organised in 11 cities including Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Silistra, Plovdiv, Rousse and Stara Zagora.

In 2014, 23 volunteers have been involved as leaders and about 600 Bulgarian students were beneficiaries. Its main partners are secondary schools across the country.

- [Multi Kulti Kitchen](#) – a project of [Multi Kulti Collective](#) – started in Sofia in 2011 and currently under development in 6 other Bulgarian cities (Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo and Blagoevgrad). Migrants and refugees living in Bulgaria host half-day events presenting their culture and cuisine. The events feature presentations, music, dances, workshops, video screenings, etc. [More than 20 events](#) have been organised by 200 + volunteers and have been attended by more than 1 000 people. Partners include international organisations such as UNHCR, national NGOs, cultural centres, community centres, migrant-run restaurants, co-working spaces, etc. The project [was featured as good practice](#) on EWSI.
- [Multi Kulti Cooking Classes](#) – a project of [Multi Kulti Collective](#) – started in 2013 in Sofia. It is build around amateur cooking classes hosted by foreign chefs who run restaurants in Sofia and get the opportunity to present their country, culture and cuisine. Around 15 classes have been hosted by volunteer migrants and refugees from 7 countries and have been attended by around 300 people. The main partners of the project are the [‘Amuse Bouche’ Cooking School](#) and migrant/refugee restaurants.
- [Friends of the Refugees](#) is a Facebook group created in the Summer of 2013. Today, it counts 4 moderators and about 5,000 members who work on the territory of Bulgaria. The beneficiaries are asylum seekers and refugees living in and outside the reception centres of the State Agency for Refugees across the country. The volunteers of this group discuss all the questions that refer to refugees (housing, health care, education, employment, family reunification, etc.) Representatives of international organisations (UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, etc.), local NGOs, state organisations are also members of the group. They give advice and provide support to the volunteers and beneficiaries. The Facebook group ‘Friends of the Refugees’ [was given ‘Human of the Year’ award](#) by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in 2013.
- [Harmanli Refugee Camp Play School](#) is a centre for play-based learning and play therapy founded in November 2014 by two British volunteers for refugee children living in Harmanli Refugee Camp. The school provides children between 4 and 14 years old with a range of activities and lessons to develop maths, science, art and English skills, knowledge and understanding, as well as opportunities for personal, social and emotional development. The play school caters for up to 300 children across 3 sessions, 3 days a week. The school aim is to introduce children to the structure and style of European schooling. The State Agency for Refugees provides space in the Harmanli Refugee Camp for the organisation of the project which is [featured as good practice](#) on EWSI.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

- TimeHeroes.org, run by TimeHeroes Foundation, is the one-stop shop for volunteering in Bulgaria. In the last 4 years, the platform has published over 900 volunteer opportunities by 520 organisers. More than 20,000 volunteers have signed up to help at 110 locations all over the country. Its English version [was launched in October 2015](#) to allow migrants and refugees to become volunteers; which is a first in Bulgaria.
- Bulgarian-Arabic language exchange in Sofia. On 5 December 2015, the [United Nations Association in Bulgaria](#) and the [Refugee-Migrant Service at the Bulgarian Red Cross](#) organised their [first language exchange](#) between refugees learning Bulgarian, and Bulgarians learning Arabic. About 30 volunteers participated.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

In Bulgaria, the 'migrant crisis' occurred in 2013. At the time, the government was not ready to prepared for the great number of asylum seekers who arrived in the country (7,144 in 2013 compared to 1,387 in 2012). Therefore, many volunteers spontaneously started helping those who needed protection. In 2015, few fugitives travelled via Bulgaria. If we compare volunteers in 2013 and 2015, two main differences can be noticed:

- A great number of those who volunteered before feel tired and disappointed as their efforts did not give satisfactory results in terms of integration, mainly due to the fact that there is no National Integration Programme nor finance schemes for integration in Bulgaria. On the other hand, migrants, in their meeting with volunteers, expressed that Bulgaria is a transit country for them on their western European countries and they are, therefore, not interested in integration in Bulgaria.
- In 2015, more foreign volunteers permanently living in Bulgaria, including refugees, started working on various projects.

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

The English version of TimeHeroes.org in an innovative way to support the volunteer involvement of migrants and refugees, offering them all the volunteer opportunities at one place.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

Due to the lack of National Integration Programme, the whole integration support is provided by NGOs. Many provide opportunities to learn the Bulgarian language, housing, health care, employment support, etc. At the end of 2015, many volunteer initiatives had too many volunteers and very few beneficiaries. For this reason, many of them didn't succeed.

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

The two 'new' initiatives mentioned above are too young to measure their impact yet.