

# 2017 Age, Gender and Diversity Participatory Assessment Report

## UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria

*'I do not speak about my personal problems. Our problems are also problems of your state. When I share them, I want to help your state'*  
Male, 52, Syria, RRC Ovcha Kupel

### I. Population of Concern

2017 marked a dramatic decrease in the **number of asylum applications** submitted to the Bulgarian authorities: 3334 between 1 January and 31 October.<sup>1</sup> This is six times lower in comparison to the applications submitted in 2016 (19 418 for the whole year) and in 2015 (20 391).<sup>2</sup> The number is the lowest since 2012 (1387), the last year before the refugee influx to Bulgaria of the end of 2013. The top three **countries of origin** of asylum seekers in 2017 remained similar to those already established as such in the beginning of 2016: Afghanistan (1044), Iraq (918) and Syria (858). The other two main countries of origin in 2017 were Pakistan (207) and Iran (72). The composition remained relatively steady with only slight variations throughout of the year.

In 2017, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) maintained the **number of its open centres** as in 2016 (in total 6)<sup>3</sup> and one closed-type facility, opened at the end of 2015. Yet, one of the open centres, TC Pastrogor, has been refurbished to serve a closed-type facility. An order by the Council of Ministers is due to formalize its transformation in the coming weeks. It is expected that once TC Pastrogor starts functioning as a closed-type facility, SAR would transfer there the detainees currently accommodated in its single current closed facility – the one in Busmantsi. One of the buildings in the largest open centre - RRC Harmanli, is also planned to be turned into a closed-type facility. Public tender for the company which would implement the reconstruction is now completed and the works have started. Both new closed-type facilities would have an overall capacity of more than 600 detainees.

The capacity of all SAR territorial units as of October 2017, before these transformations, is 5190 persons. The occupancy rate fell dramatically and gradually in comparison to the beginning of the year: from 76% in January to 18% in October. Despite the migration management measures taken by each country along the mixed migratory flow routes, the rate of abandoned refugee status determination procedures remained very high: 80% (6184 suspended and 9047 terminated procedures out of 19 718 decisions by SAR). The number of persons granted international protection was higher than in 2016: 1599 (753 persons were granted refugee status and 846 – humanitarian).<sup>4</sup> That amounts to 6%-8% increase in absolute numbers in comparison to 2016 (1495) and to 2015 (1341). Yet, the recognition rate of the largest group of asylum seekers, from Afghanistan, fell below 1%, well below the EU average first-instance rates.

The number of unaccompanied and separated children seeking protection in 2017 fell to only 13% of the applications in 2016: from 2772 UAMs in 2016, to 370 in 2017. The persistent lack of a safe environment and mechanism for support of this groups resulted in only 60 UAMs living in SAR reception centres, as of end October. 2017 saw a decrease in the number of inquiries for transfers under Dublin III Regulation: 7030 (in 2016 they were 10 377) and 431 returns (624 in 2016). Bulgaria relocated 31 asylum-seekers under the

<sup>1</sup> Data of State Agency for Refugees, <http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=8>

<sup>2</sup> Idem

<sup>3</sup> Registration and Reception Centre (RRC) in Sofia, with three subunits (in Ovcha Kupel, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna), 1 Transit Centre in Pastrogor and 2 more RRCs in Banya and Harmanli.

<sup>4</sup> Data of State Agency for Refugees, <http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=8>

European relocation scheme of September 2015. 21 of them were relocated from Greece, and, for the first time, 10 from Italy. Thus, the overall number of relocated individuals reached 60, out of a 1302 relocation quota. Currently, only 14 of those remain in the country.

No people were resettled under the 1:1 mechanism with Turkey.

## **II. Methodology of the 2017 AGD Participatory Assessment**

The AGD is an inclusive strategy 'ensuring that all diverse people have equal access to their rights, services, protection and resources as well as being able to fully participate in the decisions that affect their lives'.<sup>5</sup> The rationale behind this approach is that each person is unique and that differences between people, whether actual or perceived, can be defining characteristics that play central role in determining individual's opportunities, capacities, needs and vulnerability. The AGD strategy promotes gender equality and human rights, particularly women's and children's rights, and protection of all refugees, regardless of their ethnic, social or religious background.

In light of this guiding principle, the 2017 participatory assessment aimed at including as many and as varied people of concern as possible in terms of the abovementioned categories and their locations. The data collection method uses structured focus group interviews, following standardized questionnaires for asylum-seekers, beneficiaries of international protection and children, which were updated in 2013, and are additionally adapted to every year's operational context. Focus group discussions were conducted not only at all accommodation (reception/transit) centres, but also with people of concern living at external addresses. The sampling method, deemed best reflecting the AGD approach, is stratification sampling, which ensures proportional representation of all categories of interest, such as age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and status.<sup>6</sup>

In 2017, in contrast to the previous years, focus groups were organized throughout the year: starting in March and ending in September. Also in contrast to previous years, AGD PAs were carried out at two instances: for one month in the first, and one month during the second half of the year. The approach was changed with the aim to capture more established and long-term tendencies. Experiences from previous years have demonstrated significant variations in the results of the two parts of the assessment. The new approach assured continuous observations on processes and the changing environment.

A concluding workshop on the AGD PA exercise took place on 30-31 October 2017. Members of the multi-functional teams participated in the event and shared their observations and data collected throughout the participatory assessment, outlining the areas of improvement, prioritizing areas of concern and suggesting recommendations for further actions. This report is based on the data collected in the PA process and reflects the final discussions which took place during the concluding meeting.

## **III. Overview of the 2017 AGD Participatory Assessment**

In 2017, the total number of the focus group discussions conducted was 34, encompassing 375 persons of concern (or an estimated 15% of the population of concern<sup>7</sup>). They involved multi-functional teams, consisting of 40 representatives of 18 state and non-governmental entities, namely the State Agency for Refugees, Ministry of Education and Science, UNHCR, UNICEF, EASO, Bulgarian Red Cross, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Council of Refugee Women, Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants, Caritas Sofia, "Access to Rights"

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report 2016*, p 4, <http://www.unhcr.org/5769092c7.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The principle of division taking precedence in the determination of the composition of the focus groups was the language spoken (in view of the practical provision of interpretation from Arabic, Farsi, and English), followed by the legal status of the persons of concern (asylum-seekers or beneficiaries of international protection).

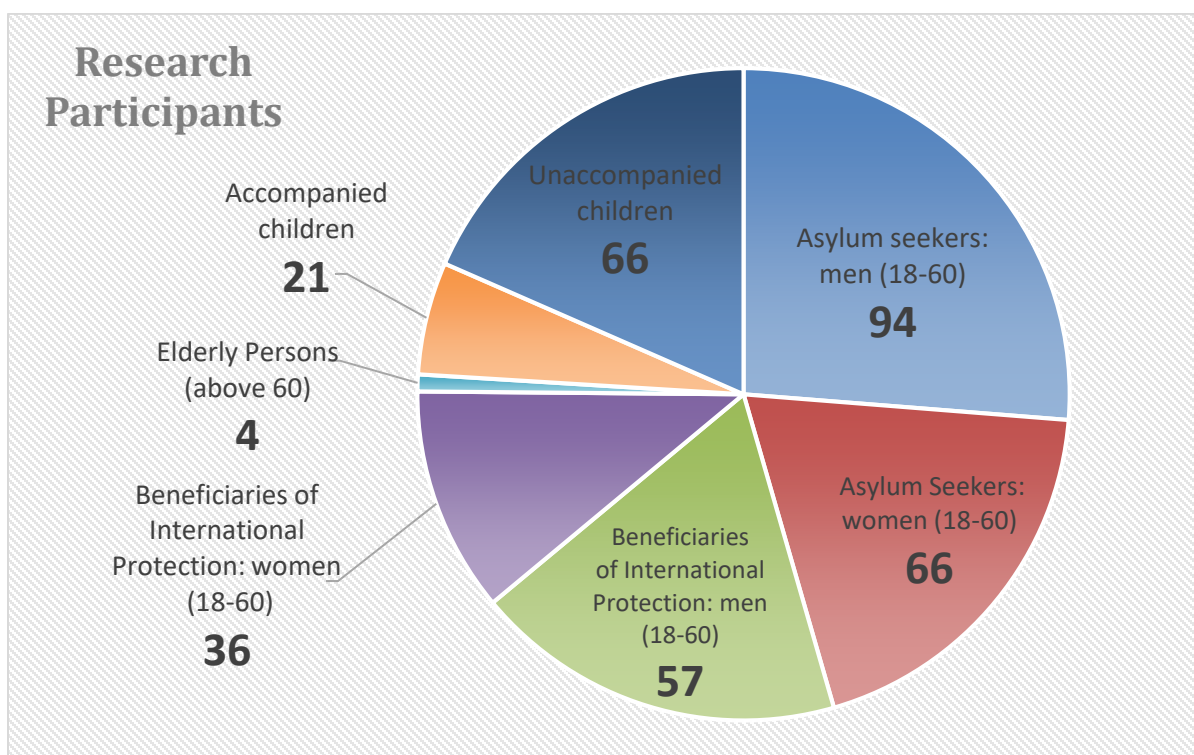
<sup>7</sup> The percentage is an estimate based on the total number of accommodated persons at the SAR facilities in 2017 (2418, MoI data). However, it excludes the asylum-seekers who resided at external addresses whose number is 414 as of September 2017, MoI data) and the beneficiaries of international protection from previous years. There is no stock or flow data on the number of PoCs present in Bulgaria, due to the lack of exit data and the irregularity of their movements.

Foundation, Centre for Legal Aid “Voice in Bulgaria”, Médecins du Monde, CVS-Bulgaria, Multi Kulti Collective, Centre for Study of Democracy, Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, Plovdiv University ‘St. Paisij Hilendarski’. The average number of respondents per focus group was 11.

25 focus groups with persons of concern in all 6 SAR accommodation centres, including one in the SAR closed-type facility in Busmantsi, and one with relocated asylum-seekers were conducted. 3 focus groups in the two Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAFs) under the Ministry of Interior (MoI)<sup>8</sup>, and 6 focus groups with asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection living at external addresses in Sofia (5) and Plovdiv (1) were conducted between 13 March and 12 September. 29 group discussions with asylum-seekers and 6 groups with beneficiaries of international protection were held. Out of those, 5 groups were with women only, 5 with men only, 4 with UAMs, 1 with UAMs under 12, 8 with Afghan nationals.

By categories:

1. Asylum-seeking men (age group 18-60) – 94 persons interviewed in total;
2. Asylum-seeking women (age group 18-60) – 66 persons interviewed in total;
3. Beneficiaries of international protection<sup>9</sup> men (age group 18-60) – 57 persons interviewed in total;
4. Beneficiaries of international protection women (age group 18-60) – 36 persons interviewed;
5. Elderly persons of concern (age group over 60) – 4 persons interviewed;
6. Accompanied children with families (asylum-seekers and recognized refugees) – 21 children interviewed;
7. Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) – 66 children interviewed.



<sup>8</sup> Persons irregularly crossing the Bulgarian border who are not seeking or did not have a possibility to seek asylum at the Bulgarian border are detained at the SCTAFs, which are accommodation facilities of closed type. Once they apply for asylum, the respective persons are to be transferred to SAR accommodation centres of open type within 6 days from the application for international protection, where they are registered as asylum-seekers and their refugee status determination procedures are initiated.

<sup>9</sup> Beneficiaries of international protection include refugee and humanitarian status holders.

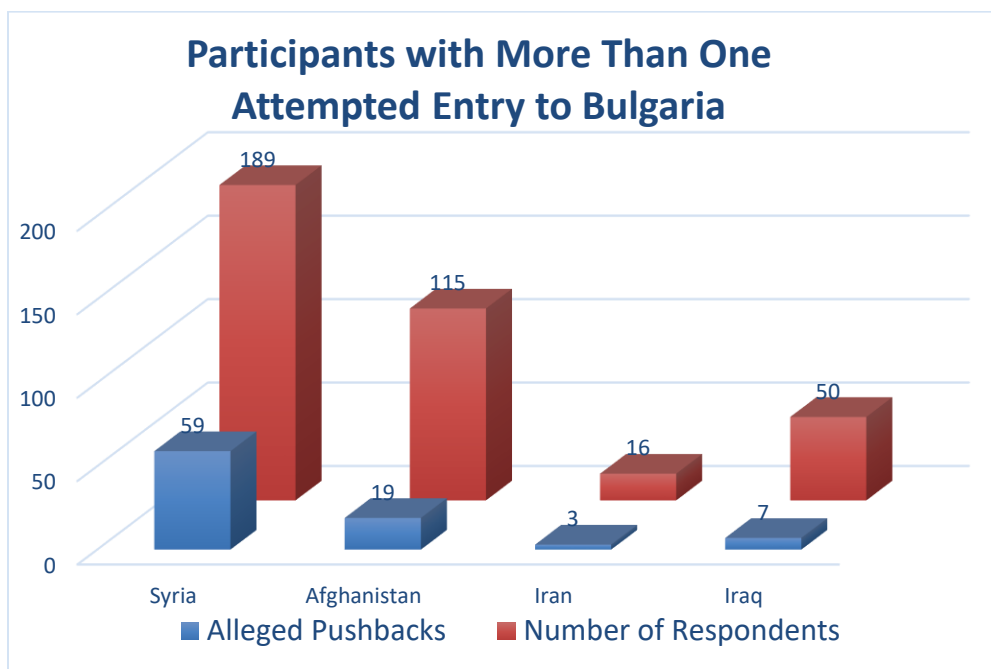
Nearly 21% of the participants were without any educational background, 33% had graduated elementary school, 39% - high school, and 4% - university. The main professions of the respondents were construction workers (8), workers in agriculture (5), cooks (5), drivers (5), mechanics (4), small-scale traders (4), barbers/hair-dressers (3), teachers (3). 47 of the respondents claimed they have never worked (predominantly women).

#### IV. Main issues Related to Asylum-Seekers

The 2017 AGD PA identified various new and still ongoing issues related to the protection of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria. It should be noted that differences are observed on the basis of country of origin. In general, asylum-seekers from Syria and Iraq face fewer problems in addressing their protection needs than those from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

#### Access to Territory and Conditions in Detention

*'I came as a refugee, but since the first day I crossed the Bulgarian border I feel as a criminal'*  
Man, 41, Syria  
Integration centre St. Anna, Caritas Sofia



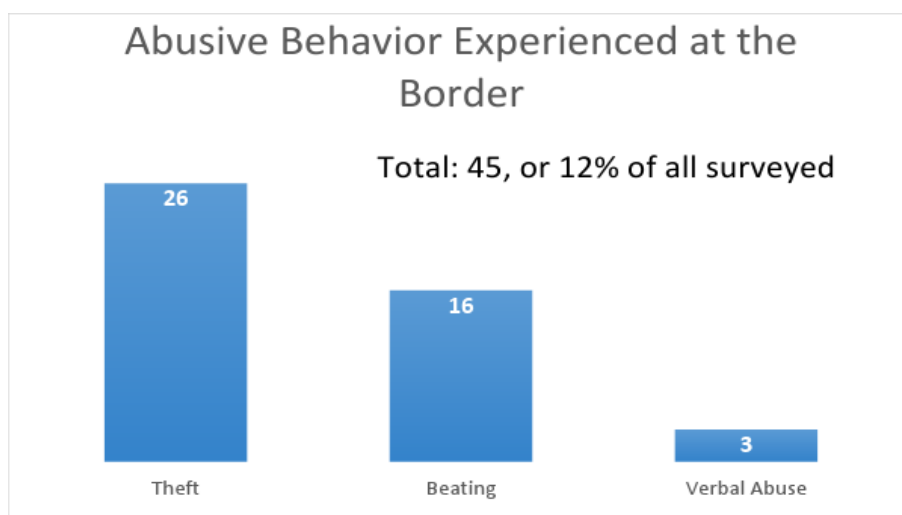
**1.1. Pushbacks:** During the focus groups, 88 respondents (or 23% of all interviewees) reported having made multiple attempts to enter Bulgarian territory, with a record number of 12 (in 2016 the record number was 13, while in 2015 - 23). It should be noted there were several cases of persons being stopped from crossing by Turkish police on Turkish territory. They were taken back into Turkey and to centres in Istanbul. There were also cases when people decided on their own accord to abandon their attempt to enter Bulgaria. However, in the vast majority of cases, respondents reported having experienced **pushbacks** from the hands of Bulgarian Border Police staff.

The highest percentage of pushbacks was reported by Syrian nationals (59 out of 189 respondents, or 31%), followed by Iranians (3 out of 16, or 19%), Afghans (19 out of 115, or 17%) and Iraqis (7 out of 50, or 14%). This statistic is in contrast to other data collected by UNHCR on such incidents, which point to Afghans as main victims of pushbacks (60% of all such reports by UNHCR in 2016 are related to Afghans). It is difficult to assess the reasons for those variations.

*'I managed to cross the border on the 12th time. Every time I got robbed until in the end, there wasn't a single thing to take away from me'*  
Unaccompanied minor, 13, Afghanistan, RRC Voenna Rampa

1.2.45 reports of **police abuse and maltreatment, including violence**, were recorded (or 12% of all interviewees). More specifically the reported types of abuse include: police beatings (both at the border and at detention facilities) in 16 cases, thefts at the border in 26 cases (mobile phones, money, valuables, but also food, clothes and shoes), humiliation by verbal abuse in 3 cases. None of these complaints from violence were officially reported and investigated due to fear of retaliation.

*'The second time the police were nicer. They just took my phone'*  
Unaccompanied minor, 16, Afghanistan, RRC Harmanli



*'I could see they were going to hit me, but I could not stop them: I just could not explain to the police that I am a refugee and I want to submit an asylum application'*  
Unaccompanied minor, 17, Afghanistan, RRC Voenna Rampa

**1.3. A prolonged average period of detention** – 22 days – in the Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAFs) of MoI, where people are usually accommodated upon apprehension, was reported. This constitutes a three-fold increase in comparison to responses received in the 2016 study. Bulgarian legislation stipulates that detainees should be transferred to the centres of SAR within six days from the submission of their application.<sup>10</sup> Reasons for delay include lack of interpretation and lack of legal aid. Asylum-seekers accommodated in SCTAF and in

<sup>10</sup> Law on Asylum and Refugees, Art. 58 (4)

SAR closed-type facility lacked information on the reasons for and the length of their detention, and expressed a need for legal consultation.

*'All my family members are already out of Afghanistan. What will I do, if they return me there?'*  
Female, 24, Afghanistan, RRC Harmanli

**1.4. Lack of interpretation services at the border and in detention facilities** was another issue that was brought up by a large part of the respondents marking no change vis-à-vis the situation in previous years. A number of respondents shared that they were unable and afraid to explain to Border Police their wish to submit asylum applications. The lack of interpretation in detention facilities results in lack of information and general understanding of the asylum procedure in Bulgaria, as well as inability to access services – as legal aid, medical or psychosocial support. Respondents shared that policemen often refuse to have any communication with them.

**1.5. General lack of information** on procedures were also reported. Many of the detainees were not aware of the reasons for their detention upon apprehension by police, their further legal options, the period they have to spend in the SCTAFs, the asylum system or the existing support. No information sessions take place in the detention centres.

**1.6.** Although some improvements were introduced, **conditions** in SCTAFs and SAR closed facility remained inadequate and substandard. Bad hygienic conditions and the presence of bedbugs cause skin infections. Complaints were registered for the irregular distribution of hygiene materials, soaps, shampoo, toothpaste, etc. Some of the respondents were dissatisfied with the quantity and the quality of the food. Some respondents had not washed their clothes for weeks on end due to lack of information on laundry schedules. Toilets cannot be used during the night, as the access to them is restricted by bars in the corridors that remain locked between 22h and 7h. People are forced to urinate in bottles.

*'The policemen do not allow us to talk to them and ask something. The only word I know in Bulgarian is 'Go away!'*  
Male, 18, Afghanistan, SCTAF Busmantsi

**1.7.** Respondents complained about restricted **access to legal aid**. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) has an agreement with DM to provide counselling to all detainees in SCTAF, and assist them in submitting asylum applications. While BHC meets all newly accommodated individuals, no referral system is in place for those who have been accommodated for several months and who would like to receive additional legal counselling.

*'Everything in Bulgaria is by force: the arrest, the signing of documents, the 'voluntary return'.*  
Male, 27, Iran, RRC Voenna Rampa

*'Everyone here tell us only one thing 'Deport!' They repeat all the time 'You will never go out of here'.*  
Male, 32, Afghanistan, SAR Closed Facility

**1.8. Restricted access to medical aid** was reported by many of the detainees. Although both SCTAFs have medical teams, respondents share that policemen often refuse to take them to the doctors. Another complaint is the lack of necessary medicines.

The access to medical aid is especially complicated in the SAR closed facility, where no doctor resides on a daily basis. Instead, medical visits to the premises occur twice per week. In June, an asylum-seeker from Pakistan died from a heart attack in the centre. No doctor was present.

*'The doctor treats flue, rashes and broken bones with the same medication'.*

Male, 18, Afghanistan, SCTAF Busmantsi

**1.9. Lack of educational and recreational activities** were reported in SCTAF Lyubimets and SAR closed facility. In all centres detainees are allowed to stay outside for a restricted period of time of up to two hours per day.

Caritas Sofia provides language and art classes in SCTAF Busmantsi, as well as sports and cultural orientation classes. The organization plans to start such activities in SCTAF Lyubimets in the upcoming weeks.

*'The boredom and the lack of hope are killing us slowly. Lyubimets is not simply a prison. It is a cemetery of souls'.*

Male, 27, Iran, RRC Voenna Rampa

## RSDP and Reception Conditions in SAR Centres

**1.10.** Interviewees shared a number of **procedural irregularities during RSDP**: cases were reported of asylum seekers not properly informed about the date and the place for their RSD interview, which resulted in them missing attendance. This problem was especially frequent in RRC Harmanli, but reported less in the other SAR centres. Similarly, RSD decisions were not properly handed to residents in RRC Harmanli. Rejection papers were not delivered in person, thus the individuals concerned were unable to appeal within the legal period of 14 days.

**1.11.** Many complaints about the **dissatisfactory quality of interpretation during RSD interviews** were lodged by asylum-seekers. These involved incorrect, incomplete and biased translations of statements. Several interviewees shared they identified the problem when reading the motivation for their negative decisions, which was based on wrong facts. No cases were reported when applicants were unable to understand the interpreter. Women are generally not asked if they would prefer to be interviewed by an interviewer and in the presence of an interpreter of the same sex.

*'There were some people in the room during the interview. I believe they were some kind of witnesses'.*

Unaccompanied girl, 12, Syria, RRC Ovcha Kupel

**1.12.** Almost all respondents confirmed that the interviews were audio-recorded, which is in accordance with the LAR. The large majority, in some focus groups 100% of the participants, reported that protocols were not read back to them in the end of the RSD interview, and that they were **obliged to sign documents** in Bulgarian language that had not been cleared and translated to them.

*'Ask whoever. We do not understand what we sign at the end of the interview'.*

Male, 33, Syria, RRC Harmanli

- 1.13. Interviewees also reported their **inability to tell their full stories** during interviews due to limited questioning and strict adherence to the official questionnaire on the part of the interviewers. No follow up questions were asked, no efforts to solicit details were made, no inconsistencies were addressed by interviewers. Some reported that their interview lasted not more than 15 minutes. Some reported that their written evidence was not accepted.

*'My interview was so short, that I could not share anything. Later on, I was not allowed to speak in the court'.*

Male, 37, Afghanistan, RRC Voenna Rampa

- 1.14. **Inadequate and substandard living conditions** in SAR centres were reported. Improvements were registered, including through renovation works, but conditions, especially in RRC Voenna Rampa, Ovcha Kupel and Harmanli remain dissatisfactory. Malfunctioning of basic infrastructure such as sewage, water supply and central heating system were reported to cause considerable discomfort. Insect infested mattresses and blankets were identified by residents as a serious health hazard. In addition, many accommodated persons are not provided with keys to their doors, which negatively impacts their security and privacy in the accommodation centre. Furthermore, respondents complained that the doors in the toilets and the bathrooms are often broken, and therefore, cannot be locked. Many of the accommodated persons, especially women, reported being afraid when using the toilets. Some complaints about the lack of variety and freshness of food were also registered.

*'There are only three bathrooms functioning in our tank shelter. The water into them is up to our knees. There is no hot water for a month now. We have only one toilet and the key for it is the most precious thing around here'.*

Female, 54, Afghanistan, RRC Harmanli

- 1.15. The majority of respondents shared that they did not receive **bed sets and hygiene materials** on a regular basis and had not been informed of the possibility to ask for new sets when the need arises. There were complaints about discriminatory treatment in the distribution of such sets.

- 1.16. While the presence of additional NGOs has improved **access to information**, persons of concern continue to face difficulties in this area. In some reception facilities, regular information sessions with newly-accommodated asylum-seekers are a regular practice since 2015, but in others no such sessions are organized. Problems were reported mainly in RRC Harmanli and RRC Voenna Rampa. Asylum seekers showed little knowledge on the activities of some of the NGOs active in the RRCs.

*'The lack of information is terrifying. We wake up every day with the fear of going to Lyubimets. Our luggage is ready'.*

Female, Iran, 31, RRC Harmanli

- 1.17. Access to **medical services** has improved due to systematic efforts on the part of SAR social workers and NGO staff. Some respondents acknowledged they were accompanied to hospitals or specialists, where interpretation was provided. A special fund was established, which covers medical needs not provided for by the general health-care system. Nevertheless, there are persisting problems, like instances when GPs refuse to register asylum seekers, which compels SAR social workers to register only those in need of medical help, rather than registering all residents in the RRC. A good practice was introduced in RRC Harmanli, where a GP resides in the centre and manages all accommodated individuals.



- 1.18. A systematically applied mechanism for **early identification and referral of vulnerable persons** of concern at all stages of the RSDP is lacking. In rare cases did respondents, especially unaccompanied minors, confirm that they had had a social interview with SAR social workers. Standardized tools for identification of vulnerability exist, but are not regularly applied.
- 1.19. Respondents mainly from RRC Sofia - Ovcha Kupel and Voenna Rampa, and RRC Harmanli, shared widespread concerns over their **safety and security** in the centres. They complained about the poor and inadequate provision of security services by elderly guards (in some cases even with mobility restrictions). This created a general feeling of insecurity and confusion among residents from different ethnicities, but also sometimes tensions between community leaders and other residents. Respondents in Voenna Rampa were particularly worried by the numerous physical attacks on asylum-seekers that happen in the vicinity of the centre.
- 1.20. **Asylum-seekers do not receive any financial support** to cover basic needs, and are not allowed to work during the first three months of the RSDP. This creates problems for many of them as they are unable to support themselves and their families. Caritas Sofia introduced the practice of distributing vouchers for 30 leva to all asylum seekers in SAR centres.
- 1.21. **Lack of recreational activities for single men** were reported. While numerous projects target children of all ages, as well as women, men are left out without options for continuous education or recreation.

*'Our life stops while we are in the camp. We do not have the chance to learn, to develop new skills. As if Bulgaria is begging us to continue forward our journey'.*  
Male, 57, Syria, RRC Ovcha Kupel

## V. Gender-related Issues Concerning Asylum-Seeking Women

In addition to the general problems relevant for all asylum-seekers irrespective of their gender (described above), women seeking asylum in Bulgaria who were interviewed during the 2017 AGD PA exercises, shared a number of specific issues relating to them and their families. The main problems identified by women are as follows:

1. **Irregular distribution of milk and diapers** for babies and children (especially for children above 1 year of age). There were complaints that often the type of diapers do not correspond to the age of the children.
2. **Lack of appropriate food for women with special dietary needs**, such as pregnant or breastfeeding women.
3. Restricted access to specific **health care services for children**, such as vaccinations, due to the inability to provide evidence of previous treatment, and unwillingness of pediatricians to register asylum-seeking and refugee babies as patients.
4. Concerns were voiced and unofficial information was shared that **domestic violence** may be occurring in some asylum-seeking families. Women acknowledged the need for information sessions on prevention of SGBV for both men and women.

*'We prefer not to talk about our problems. For our husbands it is more difficult to get used to the life in the camp. We need to support them'.*  
Female, 41, Iraq, RRC Ovcha Kupel

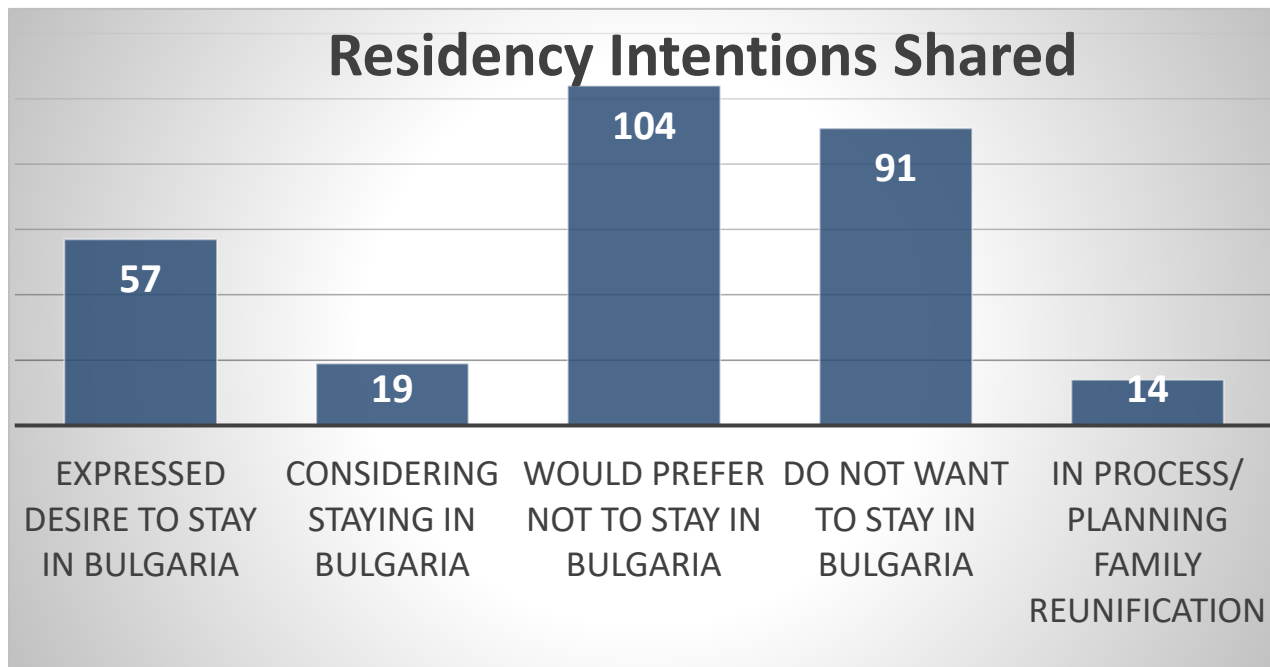
## VI. Main Issues Related to Recognized Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders

*'We are grateful to the Bulgarian people that they accepted us. But we see that the Bulgarian people themselves search for jobs abroad. Why would we stay here?'*

Male, 31, Syria, RRC Vrazhdebna

*'A lot of people left for the West, because here we lack any rights'.*

Female, 26, Syria, RRC Vrazhdebna



Since the end of 2013, there are **no targeted integration measures** provided by the state, despite the adoption of a National Strategy in the area of Asylum, Migration and Integration in June 2015. A year later, the Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for Concluding, Implementing, and Terminating an Integration Agreement for Foreigners Granted Asylum or International Protection was adopted. However, in April 2017, the care-taker government scrapped the Ordinance and not until July 2017, a new Ordinance was adopted. The newly adopted document underlines the role of the municipalities in the integration process of the refugees and it also introduces a coordination body responsible for it. The coordination body as stipulated in the Ordinance is appointed by the Council of Ministers and should be one of the Deputy Prime Ministers. The particular designated official is not yet known.

The majority of the asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection still perceive Bulgaria as a **transit country** for various reasons, one being the lack of existing support for integration. That fact is reflected in that only a handful of people expressed their willingness to remain in the country. Others stated some prerequisites for settlement support as a condition for their stay in Bulgaria. Some suggested that if the state could provide them with housing for a period ranging between 6 and 12 months, as well as employment assistance, they would consider staying in the country.

With regard to **employment** opportunities, there were few cases of status holders who had registered with the respective Labour Bureaux with the help of the NGO sector. Even if registered, beneficiaries of

international protection shared that without the knowledge of the local language, finding a job becomes an almost impossible task. Most of those willing to work are able to find jobs in the local market, but many report that their earnings are insufficient to cover their monthly expenses. Beneficiaries of international protection are usually hired in call centres with Arabic language or in the manufacturing industry, where they perform low-skilled labour. Most of the interviewed BIPs were unemployed. Without any financial means, most of them reportedly live on remittances sent by their relatives residing in other European countries.

Even though, Caritas Sofia and the BRC started providing targeted support in the area of housing, the number of status holders benefitting from it is relatively small in comparison to those in need. Those who are not part of the housing programmes have to find their own housing and they often manage to do so with the help of intermediaries, who tend to charge them higher commissions. Additionally, finding a landlord willing to rent out an apartment to families of 4 or more is often challenging and it requires a lot of funds as the deposit they require often amounts to 2 or 3 monthly rents. As an interim measure, SAR has been exceptionally allowing beneficiaries of international protection, especially those who are vulnerable, to remain at the Reception Centres for a period of up to 6 months after obtaining status. Upon leaving the centres, they face the same problems which led to the establishment of this palliative measure in the first place. Status holders who are **deported** back to Bulgaria from other European countries, once deported, are often at **risk of becoming homeless**, as they usually do not have funds, nor their Bulgarian document that is needed for their placement in the state-run temporary shelter.

*'The most difficult thing, it is to find a flat. How can I even think about the education of my daughter, when we do not have a roof over our heads?'*

Female, 31, Syria, RRC Harmanli

Access to **Bulgarian language classes** is still limited, as it is only provided by NGOs to a very small number of beneficiaries of international protection. From this year, Bulgarian language classes are also available in Plovdiv and Harmanli.

Bulgaria continued accepting **relocated refugees** from Greece, and for the first time from Italy, but most of them left the country as they appeared disappointed with the level of support that would be available after their transfer. Despite the availability of EU funds for the integration of relocated refugees, these are not disbursed, as funding is conditioned to the signing of a contract between the refugee and a municipality. So far no municipality has indicated an interest to support the integration of refugees. Bulgaria has also pledged to resettle 110 people from Turkey, but so far this has not materialized.

*'Even a good intelligent person could be turned into a criminal, if he is forced to exist on the brink of survival, without any dignity or support.'*

Male, 49, Iraq, Information-Integration Centre of BRC

In addition, the following issues were identified:

1. **Access to medical services** is problematic owing to various factors: beneficiaries of international protection are not very familiar with the health care system in Bulgaria and they often do not know that they have the obligation to cover their monthly medical insurance instalments. If not paid, refugees lose their access to the health care system and cannot register with a GP. Furthermore, GPs are reluctant to register status holders because of lack of interpretation services and medical history of the individual cases, the high mobility and no-show of the persons of concern, as well as the heavy administrative inter-institutional procedures.

2. Even though limited possibilities for **vocational training** were available in 2017 thanks to the UNHCR integration programme, they were only available to a dozen beneficiaries of international protection. Thus, there is still a **lack of available self-development opportunities**, leaving beneficiaries of international protection who do not possess any diploma or other qualification document in a very difficult situation in terms

of accessing the job market. An effective procedure for the validation of skills for persons lacking educational and qualification certificates of adults is still missing.

3. Some of the respondents were in possession of educational or vocational certificates. However, **recognition of diplomas** remains a very difficult procedure, due to the need to legalize the available certificates with the diplomatic representation of the country of origin of the beneficiary of international protection, especially when it comes to higher education certificates. Moreover, status holders, who possess documents for a completed medical or legal degree have to undergo very complex, administrative and lengthy procedures, for them to be allowed to practice their profession in Bulgaria.

4. **Socio-cultural activities** were pointed out by the participants as something important for their integration and adaptation process. Yet, these activities **are limited** and unable to encompass all the beneficiaries of international protection, despite being provided by a couple of organizations.

5. The **negative attitudes towards the refugees** persisted in 2017. The public opinion is largely shaped by the negative rhetoric in the media, as well as by the negative and misleading political discourse on the topic. The lack of welcoming communities is another factor that hampers the successful integration and adaptation process of the beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria. Furthermore, two prominent cases of discrimination and unwillingness to accept refugees by the host community were registered in 2017, resulting in local strikes and widespread media coverage.

## VII. Gender-related Issues Concerning Refugee and Humanitarian Status Holding Women

Some specific gender-related issues pertaining to refugee women include lack of understanding on their part of the specificities of gender roles in Bulgaria and the need for both men and women to work in order to sustain the family, as well as, lack of work experience in their countries of origin which negatively impacts their subsequent attempts to enter the labour market in Bulgaria. Despite this, some women have managed to find jobs and others have expressed their readiness to do so.

## VIII. Age-related Issues Concerning Men and Women over the Age of 55 (Asylum-Seekers and Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders)

The relatively low number of elderly persons of concern included in the focus groups – 14 only – renders the specific issues of this group to a large extent invisible. However, the main identified problem was the inappropriate infrastructure of the RRCs, which hinders the free movement of elderly persons (e.g. lack of elevators, low and uncomfortable beds and mattresses). Age is rarely observed when people are accommodated in the centres, with elderly individuals often offered rooms in upper floors.

There is lack of information on the application procedure for social pension (for persons aged 70 and above). Elderly people are provided for by their accompanying family members. No unaccompanied elderly persons of concern were identified.

## IX. Age-related Issues Concerning Children at the Age of 6-17 (Asylum-Seekers and Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders)

The specific issues raised during the interviews with both adults and children include: lack of access to pediatric help and free immunizations for the new-born babies, lack of awareness among mothers of their right to choose and register their children with GPs with pediatric specialization, insufficient means to meet the nutritional, material and educational needs of children during the reception and integration phases, poor material reception conditions non-conducive to the fulfillment of the health and developmental needs of children (e.g. poor sanitation and insufficient or lacking formula milk corresponding to the children's specific needs).

With regard to **education**, it was observed that asylum-seekers were not always willing to enroll their children in school because of many of the difficulties outlined above, including their wish to continue with their

secondary movements. Additional reasons for such decisions include fear to let their children go to school in unfamiliar environment and no financial possibility to meet the costs related to their children's education (proper clothing, educational materials, meals). Nevertheless, the school year 2017-2018 marked a record percentage of enrollment of asylum seeking and refugee children. As of 10 October 2017, 140 out of 267 children of school age accommodated in SAR centres were enrolled in school, which represents 52%.

For the first time, children from RRC Harmanli were enrolled in local schools. 38 schools from 9 municipalities have accepted asylum seeking and refugee children. SAR provided specialized transportation from its centres to the schools in Sofia. Among beneficiaries of international protection, the rate of enrollment in both kindergarten and schools, with the assistance of NGOs, is much higher compared to previous years. It should be also noted that SAR social workers put a lot of efforts in encouraging parents to send children to school, and to prepare lists of willing families. SAR successfully coordinated the efforts of NGOs to facilitate the process. These positive developments were possible thanks to the official adoption in April by the Ministry of Education and Science of an ordinance that regulates a simplified procedure for enrollment.

Unfortunately, the number of children enrolled for a second year is only 28, or 15% of the enrolled in 2016/2017. The high number of dropouts is a result mainly from secondary movements. A number of other factors include the limited knowledge of Bulgarian language, lack of additional support to asylum seeking and refugee children with their studies, lack of financial resources.

Of particular concern remains the treatment of **unaccompanied minors** who do not receive adequate protection and specialized care. No safe spaces for accommodation of UAMs exist in the centres, nor dedicated SAR staff to cater for their needs. During the AGD PA unaccompanied minors shared their concerns that they are accommodated with single males with whom they do not feel safe. They request to be accommodated with families. Those who are accompanied by relatives asked to be accommodated with them. Renovation works are planned in some of the centres, including the creation of a separate area where those children would be accommodated. The deadline for finalization of these projects is not confirmed.

*'The Algerian people in the next room make us feel scared. Once, during the night, one of them rushed into our room. He was drunk'.*

Unaccompanied girl, 14, Syria, RRC Ovcha Kupel

An assessment of children's needs and their best interests is done only in exceptional cases before taking decisions which affect the wellbeing of children. A lack of a coordination mechanism and an accountable body for the protection of this group of children are additional problems posing real threats to UAM's wellbeing and safety. Two worrying trends from previous years continued to be reported: some UAMs were assigned to unrelated adults or registered as adults. This likely finds its cause in the difficulties of the respective field staff to ensure the application of the special safeguards for UAMs stipulated by law, such as the provision of special protection and care in accordance with the child's best interests (lack of interpretation and incurred transportation costs, among others). Various representatives of state institutions (border guards, police officers, child protection social workers and SAR staff) reportedly contest the age of some minors, despite the principle of giving the UAMs the benefit of the doubt with regard to age, unless solid evidence to the contrary is presented (e.g. an ID document from the country of origin). Respondents in AGD PA in 2017 reported cases when legal representatives from the respective local municipalities and social workers by the Child Protection Units are not always present during RSD interviews or when the decisions are served. Children do not understand the role of those officials, and most of them have never spoken with neither of the two. Continuous support, guidance, supervision and counseling is not provided to most of the interviewed UAMs.

A persistent problem is that after being granted protection or rejected, UAMs are rarely accommodated in appropriate social services, due to lack of sufficient capacity on the part of the child protection system. BIPs are unable to obtain personal documents due to lack of permanent address. They usually remain in the RRCs. As a result of those problems, most UAMs go missing during RSDP, which further exposes them to numerous dangers. As of November, only 60 UAMs are reported to have stayed in SAR centres.

## VII. Positive Developments in 2017:

1. A record number of asylum-seeking and refugee children enrolled in kindergarten and schools, facilitated through adoption of respective legislation by Ministry of Education and Science, good coordination and provision of specialized transport on the part of SAR;
2. Stronger presence of NGOs in SAR facilities, resulting in an enhanced monitoring of the protection situation and in higher visibility of support providers among persons of concern;
3. Systematic audio-recording of RSD interviews;
4. Renovation works, although limited, in some SAR centres and in SCTAF Busmantsi;
5. Establishment by SAR of a specialized fund for covering medical emergencies which are not provided for under the general health care system;
6. Permanent presence of a GP in RRC Harmanli;
7. A gradual involvement of the National Bureau for Legal Aid in the provision of free legal aid to PoCs.

It is fair to acknowledge that some of the outlined issues – identified also during previous AGD PAs, have been addressed in the course of 2017. State institutions, UNHCR and NGOs have all put efforts to fill some of the persisting gaps and assist PoC in meeting some of their crucial needs.

UNHCR and Mol continued their good cooperation, which allowed for **trainings** of border guards and police staff at SCTAFs. A special learning programme on asylum and refugee protection is being developed jointly, and would be introduced as part of the obligatory curriculum in Mol academy.

UNHCR is in the process of developing an **information video** in 10 languages, to be broadcasted in the facilities of Directorate Migration. The video would include information on existing support in the centres, as well as on the RSD procedure. Similar video materials are being developed by Caritas Sofia and SAR for the reception centres of the Agency.

UNHCR, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the National Bureau for **Legal Aid** with the Ministry of Justice signed a tripartite agreement for mutual cooperation. The aim is to provide better quality legal assistance to asylum seekers, enhance the qualifications of lawyers registered in the National Register of Legal Aid, and develop criteria for assessing the quality of legal assistance.

SAR and NGOs have put many efforts to improve **reception conditions**. IOM, Caritas Sofia, Medecins du Monde have all funded the **renovation** of rooms or spaces for children in SAR centres. Social workers joined forces to **mobilize the community** for cleaning exercises in the premises and distribution of cleaning items. Numerous **recreational activities** were organized by NGOs, including in SCTAF Busmantsi by Caritas Sofia. The organization plans the start such in the other SCTAF in Lyubimets. For the first year, Caritas Sofia organized recreational activities in RRC Harmanli with funding from UNICEF. UNHCR supported an Afghan school in RRC Harmanli, which provides various activities for children, including Bulgarian language.

Medecins du Monde and BRC piloted special projects, dedicated on **assistance and protection of UAMs**, including social consultations, school enrolment, provision of hygiene and material assistance, as well as referral to legal aid.

Caritas Sofia addressed the lack of **financial support**, scrapped in 2015, and introduced the practice of distributing monthly vouchers for 30 leva to all asylum seekers in SAR centres. This support, though, would be limited to vulnerable individuals in the future.

The UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria continued to finance a small-scale **integration programme** for 40 beneficiaries of international protection that is implemented by the BRC. Since the beginning of the year, Caritas Sofia developed its own integration model that includes housing component, along with language trainings, child care support and consultation support to beneficiaries of international protection. The Council of Refugee Women, another UNHCR partner, also provides consultation support to beneficiaries of international protection. As of this year, UNHCR, through its partners, also provides **language courses** for refugees residing in Plovdiv. Through its partner, BRC, the UNHCR is able to support the children, enrolled in schools in Haskovo district, by providing them with Bulgarian language support and school materials.

The UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria funds a pilot housing programme, again implemented by BRC, that is for a three-month period, from September to December 2017.

UNHCR conducted a research on the employment opportunities of the refugees in the Bulgarian job market and began collecting the available job vacancies in order to unify them and create a single job database.

## **VIII. Recommendations by Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

During AGD focus groups asylum seekers and refugees came up with their own proposals on improving the asylum system. These could be summarized as follows:

### **1. On conditions in SCTAFs**

- Provision of courses in English, German and Bulgarian languages;
- Improved access to information and legal aid through videos and posters with contact information;

### **2. On conditions in SAR Centres**

- Posters in each centre with a list of all NGOs, the service they provide and pictures of their staff;
- Regular information sessions, especially immediately upon arrival in SAR centres;
- Establishment of a simple mechanism for submitting complaints;
- Placement of drying racks, installment of lights in the yards and the playgrounds;
- Monthly meetings between kitchen personnel and women in order to adjust the food menu;
- Bulgarian language classes by professional Bulgarian teachers, not volunteers;

### **3. On integration support**

- Refugees in Bulgaria to choose an individual who would be the voice and the face of the community in negotiations with institutions and NGOs;
- A B1-level course in Bulgarian language to be organized, audio recordings to be produced in addition to the textbooks, the gaps between separate Bulgarian courses to be limited;
- Organization of more social events and meetings;
- More opportunities for visits in places connected to Bulgarian culture, traditions and history;
- More work on the part of NGOs and international organizations to change attitudes towards refugees in Bulgarian society;

## **IX. Recommendations for Further Action**

The members of the multifunctional teams that took part in the PA focus groups and representatives of state institutions, including SAR, Border Police, Directorate Migration and the State Agency for Child Protection formulated a number of recommendations, based on the main issues identified throughout the study, and outlined above. Those recommendations were developed during a final seminar of the AGD PA, organized by UNHCR at the end of October:

### **On 2018 AGD PA**

1. UNHCR to continue including new partners in the 2018 AGD PA, like representatives of UAMs from the municipalities, social workers from Child Protection Units in the Social Assistance Directorate; teachers and directors of schools; UNHCR to encourage more active participation on the part of the state institutions;
2. AGD PA methodology for 2018 to be further adapted to the dynamic asylum context and to focus more precisely on intentions of asylum seekers and refugees;

### **On access to territory and detention:**

3. UNHCR to continue the provision of training to border guards and Migration Directorate staff with regard to traumatic experiences and cultural specificities of persons of concern (with an emphasis on the needs of women and children). Trainings on human rights to be also planned, courses on asylum and migration to become part of the obligatory curriculum in the MoI Academy;
4. UNHCR to train heads of police units in Sofia, Haskovo and Sliven who implement the newly introduced restriction of movement of asylum seekers within territorial zones;
5. Border Police and Migration Directorate to continue the provision of information materials to the people of concern, irrespective of their location across the country, including the contact details of

- BHC and other legal aid providers; Special information sets to be developed for children and vulnerable groups with pictures;
6. Border Police and Migration Directorate to provide interpretation services from qualified interpreters, including female ones;
  7. Migration Directorate to consider longer hours of outdoor activities of detainees, especially for children;
  8. Migration Directorate to facilitate access to psycho-social support by NGOs to detainees;
  9. Migration Directorate to consider hiring of social workers in the SCTAFs;
  10. Migration Directorate to introduce the practice of information sessions upon accommodation;
  11. Bulgarian Government to introduce legal pathways, including resettlement, to Bulgaria in order to reduce irregular movements and ensure proper migration control, including improvement of the working conditions of border guards;

#### **On RSDP**

12. SAR to improve access to information on RSDP in an understandable language: through brochures (with a stress on Dublin Regulation), videos in its centres and regular (monthly) consultations with multifunctional teams;
13. SAR, Directorate for Social Assistance and National Agency for Child Protection to introduce regular BIA and BID procedure for UAMs, UNHCR and NGOs to monitor and support;
14. SAR to consider introducing 'Blue rooms' during RSD interviews for UAMs;
15. UNHCR to continue training legal representatives of UAMs, social workers from Child Protection Units in Directorates for Social Assistance, SAR social workers;
16. SAR, UNHCR, NGOs and IOM to improve coordination in provision of legal aid to asylum seekers in SAR centres;
17. SAR to continue ensuring the quality of the RSD procedure, including reading out the RSD protocols before signing, UNHCR and NGOs to continue monitoring and share recommendations; with SAR;
18. SAR to provide a dedicated fund for specialized examinations for the purposes of RSDP (age assessment, medical/psychological tests) under AMIF;
19. EASO, SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to conduct trainings for interpreters, SAR staff, judges on RSD and vulnerability (with a focus on victims of torture);

#### **On Reception Conditions:**

20. UNHCR and partners to keep monitoring the reception conditions at all stages of the protection of people of concern (incl. at the border, Allocation Centre Elhovo, SCTAFs and SAR reception facilities); Border Police, Migration Directorate, SAR to establish functioning complaints mechanism;
21. SAR and relevant institutions to inspect the material base and conditions, identifying and ensuring quality refurbishments, also taking into consideration the special needs of vulnerable persons of concern; A fund for regular repairs to be established, AMIF funds to be considered;
22. SAR to introduce the organization of info sessions on various topics in all of its centres, including RSD, rights and obligations, zones of free movement, internal rules, SGBV prevention, integration opportunities, for both asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection as a regular and systematic practice in all reception facilities; UNHCR and NGOs to actively participate and support with their provision;
23. SAR to improve access to information, including on existing support that NGOs provide, through information brochures in understandable languages, video materials, posters;
24. SAR to ensure that the mechanism for early identification of vulnerable persons of concern is functioning and UNHCR and partners to monitor;
25. Bulgarian Government to have a contingency plan in case of an influx, guaranteeing sufficient reception capacity and human resources;
26. SAR to reintroduce the financial assistance to asylum-seekers, especially for the vulnerable ones;
27. SAR to consider a more systematic usage of the Ex-officio registration with GPs, especially in Sofia;
28. Migration Directorate and SAR to ensure regular provision and sufficient quantities of quality and diverse food, appropriate for persons with special dietary needs (pregnant or breastfeeding women, individuals with chronic diseases like diabetes);



29. SAR to expedite the establishment of safe spaces for UAMs, ensuring strengthened security and dedicated social work with them. All activities should be sustainable and not dependent on availability of external funds;
30. SAR, State Agency for Child Protection, Agency for Social Assistance to regularly conduct best interest assessment and to ensure protection and care to UAMs;
31. Municipalities to ensure quality representations of UAMs at all stages of their reception and protection; UNHCR and NGOs to assist;
32. SAR to improve coordination of NGOs' activities through reintroduction of coordination meetings in each of its centres;
33. SAR to promote community mobilization with the help of NGOs and UNHCR, ensuring monitoring of the work of community leaders and the necessary provisions (e.g. cleaning materials);
34. SAR to ensure quality security services at all facilities, with a focus on vulnerable groups, incl. UAMs and SGBV survivors;
35. SAR with assistance of NGOs to organize recreational and sports activities for young adults and single in all its centres, especially in existing or future closed-type facilities;
36. SAR and SCTAF, together with NGOs, to facilitate volunteering activities for all accommodated persons, focusing on women and children;

### **On Integration**

37. Bulgarian government to appoint deputy prime-minister, responsible for coordinating the application of the Ordinance on Integration; respective administration from the Council of Ministers to be identified;
38. Ministry of Interior to set up a mechanism for funding integration activities under the Integration Ordinance; direct allocation of funds to municipalities to be considered (as in the case of relocated/resettled refugees);
39. SAR to consistently prepare integration profiles of individuals willing to remain in Bulgaria;
40. Coordinating deputy prime-minister, SAR and Mol to proactively encourage local authorities to sign integration agreements; up-to-date information (on possibilities for funding, interested individuals) to be provided to municipalities on a regular basis;
41. Ministry of Interior to envision funding of housing opportunities under AMIF, as a part of a comprehensive integration support;
42. Ministry of Health to facilitate the adoption of a procedure for deregistration of beneficiaries of international protection with GPs;
43. Ministry of Regional Development to facilitate the adoption of a special procedure for registration and deregistration of beneficiaries of international protection;
44. Ministry of Education and Science to finalize the adoption of official school programmes in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language and call public tender for textbooks and other learning materials;
45. UNHCR and NGOs to actively engage in support of schools with asylum seeking and refugee children through training of teachers and directors, material support, cultural and tolerance workshops;
46. Bulgarian language classes to be proliferated, including classes for Bulgarian citizenship exams, driving licence, out-of-working hours courses, etc.;
47. SAR, the Employment Agency, UNHCR, NGOs to partner for improving access to labour market, through exchange of employment opportunities, joint job fairs;
48. The Employment Agency, UNHCR and NGOs to consider targeted vocational training to refugees, bound to needs of local economy;
49. UNHCR, SAR, NGOs and other relevant institutions to train journalists and disseminate positive refugee-related stories, myth debunking sessions at schools and in municipalities;
50. SAR and competent institutions, with the support of UNHCR and partners, to provide sensitization and capacity building activities to all relevant stakeholders working with persons of concern, including on working with UAMs; elaboration and implementation of information campaigns and awareness-raising sessions, especially for municipalities on a local level;
51. SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to regularly meet journalists, take them to field missions, accumulate rational reasons for refugee support and integration;

52. SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to maintain the existing coordination mechanisms between various stakeholders and to motivate state institutions to take ownership of them; UNHCR and relevant stakeholders to re-establish the media working group.

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The UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria would like to express its gratitude to all asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection for their participation in the 2017 AGD Participatory Assessment, as well as to the experts from various state institutions, and SAR in particular, NGOs and volunteers who supported and contributed to its implementation.

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