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## **ASYLUM SEEKERS and REFUGEES in BULGARIA: BETWEEN OPENED and CLOSED DOORS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Since 2011, the increasing immigrant inflow from the Middle East to the European Union has led to the implementation of the Bulgarian policy towards asylum and refugees in a specific way. Bulgaria is a border state of the European Union where the people from the conflict regions can find security and their rights to be protected. The article draws attention to the capacity of the state institutions and readiness of society to host asylum seekers/refugees and develops questions on possibilities of their reception and integration examined by different interdisciplinary techniques of ethnographic research. The results of the survey show that asylum seekers/refugees find themselves in a contradictory situation between the Bulgaria's asylum policy under a number of international instruments and national legislation, and the government decisions, the anti-refugee propaganda and the negative public attitudes. This controversial situation strengthens the country's transit position in the migration corridor to other European countries.*

**Keywords:** *refugees, migrants, asylum, stereotypes*

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# Bulgaristan'da Sığınmacılar ve Mülteciler: Açılıp Kapanan Kapılar Arasında

## ÖZET

2011 yılından itibaren Ortadoğu'dan Avrupa Birliği ülkelerine doğru artmakta olan göçmen akışı, sığınma arayanlara ve mültecilere yönelik Bulgar politikasında spesifik bir uygulama biçimine yol açtı. Bulgaristan, sorunlu bölgelerden gelen insanların güvenlik ve haklarını koruma imkânı bulabileceği, Avrupa Birliği'nin sınır ülkesidir. Makale, etnografik araştırmanın çeşitli disiplinlerarası yöntemlerini kullanarak, devlet kuruluşlarının sığınmacıları/mültecileri barındırma konusundaki yeterliliği ve toplumun bu kişileri kabul etmedeki hazırlık düzeyi üzerinde durmakta, mültecilerin kabulü ve entegrasyonuna dair mevcut olanakları sorgulamaktadır. Yapılan araştırmada ortaya çıkan sonuçlara göre, sığınmacı/mülteci grupları, Bulgaristan'ın bir dizi uluslararası sözleşme uyarınca yürüttüğü barındırma politikalarıyla bu konudaki kendi ulusal yasaları arasında meydana gelen çelişkiler, hükümet kararları, kamuoyundaki mülteci karşıtı propaganda ile toplum içindeki negatif tepkiler gibi pek çok olumsuz etkenle karşı karşıya kalmaktadırlar. Bu çelişkili durum, Bulgaristan'ın diğer Avrupa ülkelerine uzanan göç koridorundaki transit konumunu sağlamlaştırmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** mülteciler, göç, sığınma, stereotipler (kalıp yargılar)

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, the inflow of asylum seekers from the Middle East to Europe has become one of the central questions of the public agenda in Bulgaria that has sparked many debates and reactions in the context of the European Union common asylum policy. This article focuses on the Bulgarian reaction to the so-called 'refugee problem' - the readiness of the state and society to accept asylum seekers, the adequacy of political decisions and speeches, and their public effects. The majority of Bulgarians as well as other Eastern Europeans have become an example of non-tolerance and their cultural tradition of hospitality and understanding of ethnic *Other* has shattered. Their perception on refugees has been constructed through a variety of traditional and contemporary *orientalisms* (as introduced by Ed. Said (1978) on whether to be '(un) hospitable', what and how their

‘hospitality’ will cost. Since 2013 the refugee public image(s) has been formed on base of the notion of ethnic and religious *Other* (Danova et al. 1995). Within the public debate Pros and Cons of accepting of asylum seekers/refugees, the self-perceptions for *Us* as Orthodox People and Europeans, and *Them* as Middle Eastern Muslims have been filled with new content and marked by different boundaries.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Since the 1990s, the scholars’ attention on refugees in Bulgaria has been developed as a separate part of ethnic and migration studies due to the increasing number of asylum seekers in the country. Legislation, adaptation, ethnicity and identity have been examined by different scholars from governmental and non-governmental scientific and educational organizations such as the Bulgarian Academy of Science, the New Bulgarian University (the Center for European Refugee and Migration Ethnic Studies), the International Center of Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (Krasteva 2005; 2006; Krasteva et al 2010; Haydinyak 2011; Mancheva and Troeva 2011: 17-68; 177-216). In this research the main question is ‘Are asylum seekers/refugees (un) welcome in Bulgaria?’ and it is explored in aspects of national policy, legal framework, institutions, social attitudes and reactions through multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus 1996: 95-117; Falzon 2009). Legislative documents, public statements, statistics and reports, media sources, interlocutions and life-story interviews with refugees, asylum seekers and Bulgarians are analyzed. The field work was conducted among asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Iraq and Iran in Sofia with different education and family status from 2011 to October 2016. The majority of asylum seekers are Kurds (Kurmanji and Sorani speaking), Afghanes and Arabs and their religious affiliation is Sunni Islam. Most of them are single men. Due to the specificity of the collected data and ethnical consideration to the interlocutors/respondents, the filed materials are not provided for use in a public archival institution.

The term ‘refugee’ regarding its legislative definition and public use that contains meaning of economic (illegal) immigrant is also analyzed. Bulgaria is a transit destination, part of the East Mediterranean migration flow of the asylum seekers from the Middle East, as well as from other regions (İçduygu and Sert 2007: 37-54). Thus, according to asylum seekers/refugees’ intentions for settlement in the country they can be defined as ‘transit migrants’. Moreover, they are expected and encouraged to migrate again, and considered to be ‘people who should leave’ (Collyer and de Haas 2012: 468-484). The nature of transit migration could be hardly understood, without considering the dynamics and characteristics of context, historical experience and public opinion in the host country, as well as the challenges that asylum seekers generally face.

### **BULGARIAN POLICY TOWARDS ASYLUM SEEKERS/REFUGEES**

Bulgaria is a country that has a historical experience in the temporary and permanent adoption and integration of coethnic (Bulgarian) and foreign refugees (Russians, Armenians, Greeks) as well as other types of immigrants as workers and students (Greek Cypriots, Vietnamese, Arabs, Kurds, Africans) in terms of legislative practices, organization and integration during the XX<sup>th</sup> c. With the establishment of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1944, the policy towards refugees was defined by the Constitutions of 1947 and 1971. In the most general sense refugees were considered as foreigners who are persecuted because of their political positions, their rights as workers are violated, or their freedom of cultural activities, artistic and scientific activities are the subject of racial discrimination (Gencheva 2012: 12-13). These asylum seekers received protection if their positions are considered to be ‘appropriate’ for the Bulgarian Communist Party in the context of the Cold War (Gaddis 2005). At the end of the century the Christian refugees became the favorite ethnic minorities.

## *Legal framework and institutions*

Unlike the experience of Bulgaria on refugees during the XX<sup>th</sup> c. when hundreds of thousands asylum seekers were welcomed, the present situation is different. Since 1989, the Bulgarian policy towards asylum seekers has been reformulated in the context of democratic reforms. Until now, it has written and unwritten rules depending on the international context and social attitudes in the country. In 1992, the Bulgarian parliament ratified the Geneva Convention (1951) and the New York Protocol (1967) of the United Nations relating to the Status of Refugees that has defined the base of the new policy on asylum and integration of refugees. The Geneva Convention gives right for asylum to the people affected of events ‘occurring in Europe or elsewhere before 1 January 1951’. These chronological and geographical limitations were removed by the later adopted New York Protocol<sup>1</sup>. Recognition of these international political acts without any reservations led to changes of the Bulgarian policy regarding the redefinition of the term ‘refugee’, requirements of granting a refugee status to the people persecuted in their country of residence, including those without citizenship, as well as establishment of the rights and obligations of refugees in the host country, protection from forced return and expulsion.

Under the influence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (an institution that was recognized in Bulgaria in 1992), the Bulgarian government adopted a regulation on granting refugees status by Decree №208 in 1994. In general terms, it confirmed the commitment with the Geneva Convention and the New York Protocol as it regulates the right, order and procedure for refugee status application (Darzhaven vestnik № 40 from 16 May, 2000; № 84 from

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Treaty Collection. *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Geneva 28 July 1951; Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, New York, 31 January 1967;* Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=5&subid=A&lang=en>, (Accessed 15 November, 2015)

14 October, 1994). In 1999, the Bulgarian Parliament adopted the Law on Refugees, which later in 2002 was replaced by the Law on Asylum and Refugees. Based on the Geneva Convention and the New York Protocol, this law was harmonized with the EU's legislation framework as a requirement of Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, and was changed almost every year in order to be adequate to the contemporary migration flow. According to the current legal terms, any foreigner legally or illegally entered the country can lodge an application for international protection and to be granted *refugee status* or *humanitarian status* (subsidiary protection). International protection holders as a whole have the right to be accommodated, to medical care, access to the labour market, to education and professional training, family reunion within the territory of Bulgaria, and to apply for citizenship in accordance with legal requirements, etc<sup>2</sup>. They do not have the right to participate and vote in national and local elections and referendums, to establish and join political parties, to be appointed to the military nor to state service.

In 1992, a state institution responsible for the implementation of the policy on asylum and refugees as a legal entity was established under the name National Bureau for Territorial Asylum and Refugees. In 1999, it was transformed into an Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers, and in 2002, into the State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers (SAR). According to the last changes of the Law on Asylum and Refugees in Bulgaria, the Chairman of the SAR has the right to grant international protection and is entitled to place asylum seekers in closed centers (until now, the SAR's accommodation centers had opened a restricted regime of entry and exit), to determine a zone for the asylum seekers' movement which they may not leave without permission (Darzhaven vestnik № 80 from 16 October, 2015). The SAR has become the most important institution which fulfills the legislative

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<sup>2</sup> State Agency for Refugees. *Prava i zadylzheniya na chuzhdentsite poluchili zakrila spored zakona za ubezhishteto i bezhantsite. (in Bulgarian)*, Available at: [www.eref.government.bg/docs/PRAVA.doc](http://www.eref.government.bg/docs/PRAVA.doc), (Accessed 15 November, 2015)

policy on asylum and refugees, and is supported by the authorities of the State Agency of National Security, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Defence.

Since 2007, Bulgaria, as an EU member, is obliged to apply a common policy on asylum and to observe the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). One of the most important decisions that the government has to implement is the Dublin Regulation (Regulation (EC) № 343/2003 known as ‘Dublin II’<sup>3</sup>; Regulation (EU) № 604/2013 known as ‘Dublin III’<sup>4</sup>), which has been adopted by the EU member states and Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein. It determines the responsibilities of the states to examine an asylum application. Its main principle is ‘one state, one asylum application’ or an asylum seeker has the right to apply for an international protection in the first country of entry that is responsible to accept his application. This regulation is aimed at avoiding at the so-called ‘asylum shopping’.

Until 2014, the Dublin Regulation was not considered to be problematic within EU member states. Since then, Bulgaria, and other European countries such as Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Malta, Italy, and Greece have started to complain. The Regulation’s effectiveness has been questioned due to the increased number of asylum seekers and their disproportionate distribution. Additionally the foreigners who apply for international protection in the first country of entry and migrate and apply for asylum to another EU member state can be ‘returned/deported’ back to the first country of their application. In the case of Bulgaria, the majority of asylum applicants moved to Germany,

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<sup>3</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003, Official Journal L 050, 25/02/2003, Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32003R0343:EN:HTML>, (Accessed 15 November, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, Official Journal of the European Union L180/31, Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013R0604>, (Accessed 15 November, 2015)

as well as to Sweden and Norway, and sooner or later they could be 'returned'. Although the Bulgarian government complains about the 'Dublin III', its formal implementation is planned by the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration 2015-2020. A result or symbol of the Bulgarian policy on asylum and refugees is the newly built fence on Bulgarian border with Turkey in late 2013 and early 2014, aiming to limit the entry of asylum seekers and to encourage their crossing through the authorized border points (which in reality is not allowed). At same time, it is a well-known that Bulgaria has become an area of active international migrant smuggling with internal southern (with a point at Dragoman) and northwest routes (with points at Vidin and Montana) (Montanari and Piazzese 2016).

### ***Effects and consequences - Fieldwork data***

According to the SAR' statistics: from 1993 to 2012 incl. 21,267 people sought asylum and 20,029 decisions were taken by the SAR on either to grant refugee status or not (of which refusals are 6,462). From 2013 to 2016 incl. – 58,034 asylum seekers were registered and 46,795 decisions were taken (refusals are 3,209) as 27,176 asylum procedures were terminated. Since the beginning of 2013, the top three countries of origin are Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq<sup>5</sup>. Approximately 1000 asylum seekers are Christians by religious identification and the rest are Muslims. Currently the SAR is responsible for the management of five reception centers in Sofia (3), Harmanli (1) and village of Banya in Nova Zagora municipality (1), and a transit center in the village of Pastrogor in Svilengrad municipality with common capacity which has been increased to approximately 6000 individuals. There is no official data on the number of refugees (with granted status) residing in the country but usually once granted refugee status, they leave Bulgaria.

Despite the legal framework, improvement measures in reception services held in 2014-2015 (appointment of new expert and

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<sup>5</sup>State Agency for Refugees. *Applications and decisions taken 01.01.1993-28.02.2017*. Available at: <http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=21>, (Accessed 15 March, 2017)

technical stuff, shortening the application procedure, increasing the camps' accommodation capacity) and EU subsidies, the situation of asylum seekers from the period of their entry in the country has been considered problematic. In January 2014, the UNHCR issued a position paper call to the states participating in the Dublin agreement to temporarily suspend the transfers of asylum seekers to Bulgaria, due to the reception deplorable conditions and inhuman treatment<sup>6</sup>. In 2015, according to a report of the international organization OXFAM, along with a murder of an Afghan man passing through the Bulgarian territory, over 100 cases of people from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were victims of police brutality and racketeering by the officers in the Ministry of Interior from May to November 2015. These violated people were interviewed in the Serbian border town of Dimitrovgrad and their stories were summarized<sup>7</sup>.

The rights of asylum seekers who remain in Bulgaria are determined by the two periods: before (1) and after (2) being granted refugee status.

(1) Within the application period they are entitled to be accommodated at the SAR's units (camps), to receive free medical care, food, access to the labor market, and education. Registration cards that are a type of personal documents are issued by the SAR. According to the collected field materials, the application procedure prior to 2013 could last between 3 to 5-6 years, and since 2013 – only a few months. Most of the asylum seekers prefer to rent apartments in Sofia because of the poor material conditions and limited regime of exit and entry in the SAR's accommodation centers. Some of them were working illegally,

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<sup>6</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR observations on the current asylum system in Bulgaria*, 2 January 2014, Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52c598354.html> (Accessed 11 April 2017)

<sup>7</sup> OXFAM International. *Refugees crossing into Europe tell of abuse at hands of Bulgarian Police*. 13 November 2015, Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2015-11-13/refugees-crossing-europe-tell-abuse-hands-bulgarian-police>, (Accessed 20 November, 2015)

hired by employers from their ethnicity or country of origin in the fast foods industry. Asylum seekers have the right to work legally after 3 months residence in the country. Furthermore, to work legally was difficult, because both Bulgarian employers and state institutions lacked administrative experience with registration cards issued by SAR and they were not well informed about the asylum seekers' right to labor employment. Similar observations have been made by Bulgarian scholars E. Troeva and M. Mancheva who discovered that the labor contacts and social communication between Bulgarians and refugees are limited (2011: 177-216). Additionally, some asylum seekers who wish to work legally face problems in providing the required certificate of conviction issued by Bulgarian judicial institution (because they are not Bulgarian citizens) or by the institution from their country of origin (H.K. 30 years old, ethnographic interview, Sofia, 2013)

(2) After an international protection (refugee, humanitarian) status is granted, refugees have the right to receive a personal identification number, a residence ID card (stating the status) and an international ID travel document (i.e. they have right to travel within EU countries, but not to work there) to be issued. They are also required to leave the SAR's accommodation centers, and medical and social security additionally become their responsibility. According to the interlocutors, one of the most challenging issues is the address registration required for the issuance of their ID documents. Bulgarian landlords usually refuse to give permission to the renters for address registration. Thus, 'the shopping' of addresses has appeared. Experiencing bureaucratic procedures, limited access to the labor market, low pay, refugees do not see conditions for a 'normal life-style' and integration. Often their relatives in the countries of origin and migration send financial support to them. The question of refugee remittances in Bulgaria has still not been explored. The newcomers prefer to leave Bulgaria and migrate to another EU country by relying on social and kinship networks. "How do the refugees can stay and find labor realization here if the Bulgarians emigrate abroad because they

are ‘pushed’ by the law pay and unemployment in Bulgaria?’” (S.T., 38, ethnographic interview, Sofia, 2013).

The practical aspects of the Dublin regulation actually create restrictions for asylum seekers to settle down and work in more economically developed countries. Most of the international protection holders in Bulgaria, as well as other countries, migrate to Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and re-apply for refugee status. Through the Eurodac fingerprint system (which contains all fingerprints of asylum seekers in the EU and non-EU Schengen countries) their second application has been ignored and in the last few years about 500 asylum seekers were returned to Bulgaria. Several cases of erasure of asylum seekers’ fingerprints through burning are known (R.T., 41 years old, ethnographic interview, Sofia, 2014).

While the German government announced an open-door policy (albeit temporary) in 2015 towards refugees and welcomed more than 1 million asylum seekers, Bulgarian authorities were more inclined to promote the German hospitality instead of their own, demanding a change of the Dublin Regulation in order to not ‘receive’ back its ‘old, unwelcomed guests’. Although the law on asylum and refugees exists, the representatives of the state institutions prefer to implement a hard-line approach towards asylum seekers relating to them as a treat with socio-economic and national security dimensions.

## **PUBLIC PORTRAITS of ASYLUM SEEKERS / REFUGEES**

### **ATTITUDES and REACTIONS**

Since 2013, the public image of asylum seekers/refugees in Bulgaria has been constructed as a result of their increased number, their media coverage and political discourse on them. Although readiness of the parts of Bulgarian society and non-governmental organizations (the Bulgarian Red Cross, UNICEF, Caritas-Sofia, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, etc.) to assist in the reception and

integration processes, the public hate speech has led to sustainable negative public image.

### ***Public media portraying***

From 2011 to 2016, the Bulgarian media interest towards the Middle East and immigration inflow to Europe is expressed in a number of broadcasts, documentaries, and news, presented by television channels with national coverage such as BNT, BTV, NovaTV, TV7. The nature of the conflicts, participations of the Bulgarian soldiers in the NATO missions in Afghanistan and Iraq were reported by the journalists such as Elena Yoncheva (“Syria: Aleppo rebels” 2013, TV7), Dilyana Gaytandzhieva (“Red Border” 2013, TV7), Ruslan Trad and Georgi Totev (“Faces of War” 2014, BTV). Since 2013, when the asylum seekers presence has become visible in Sofia the journalists’ interest has been provoked. Movies about the movement of asylum seekers from Syria and Afghanistan to Bulgaria and Germany were created by Elena Yoncheva (“On the border fence” 2013, TV7), by Vladislav Velev (“Salvation: Germany” 2015, BNT). Within the daily television news and broadcasts on asylum seekers/refugees in Bulgaria two trends of neutral and negative presentation can be observed. On the one hand, only facts and data given by another sources were reported without to be analysed or commented on. On the other hand, the immigrants from the Middle East were directly or indirectly described and categorized as a social and economic burden, as well as a potential national threat. This negative presentation repeats the pattern of media reflecting on the Roma people in the country. For example, their ethnic origin is always stressed in conflict situations (if the ‘violator’ is a Bulgarian, he is called by his gender or social characteristics, but if the ‘violator’s origin is Roma, he/she is presented by ethnic belonging) (Lazarova 2004: 60-74). Instead of developing questions in depth, majority of the journalists were aiming at presenting the spiciness and scandalous facts, using incorrect and chaotic use of terms and concepts as ‘refugees’, ‘economic migrants’, ‘illegal migrants’. Until 2015, asylum seekers/refugees were presented as a homogeneous community.

Their ethnocultural specifics and country of origin, and motivation for migration were not discussed. The obligation of Bulgaria to accept asylum seekers under the Geneva Convention, the implementation of a European common policy on asylum, and the use of the EU subsidies are topics which seem to be unattractive for media discussions and findings. The journalists themselves admit their inability to reflect the so called ‘refugee topic’ which is indicated in the interview of Elena Yoncheva in national daily newspaper of “Trud” from 11 November, 2015, where she noted that the work of journalists is not only to communicate and summarize the facts reported by one or another institution<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, since 2013, when the immigration flow to Bulgaria has been increased, the public speech of the representatives of state and government institutions on refugee issues has been crucial for construction of refugee’s negative image. On November 20, 2013, at meeting of the Consultative Council on National Security at the Presidency, the Minister of Interior presented a report on increasing migratory pressure as one of the most serious challenges to the national security of Bulgaria<sup>9</sup>. In 2014, also the SAR’s chairman’s public statements included variety of negative suggestions: ‘The Refugees are similar to the Roma, they are segregated and they do not want to study Bulgarian language ... Rich refugees want to go to Switzerland, Germany and Sweden, and other European countries, and only the Kurds remain with us, who are much worse than our Gypsies’<sup>10</sup>. This

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<sup>8</sup> Trud Online. “Elena Yoncheva: Trybva da sprem da iznasyame demokratiya s bombi” (In Bulgarian). An interview with Elena Yoncheva. 22.11.2015. Available at: <https://trud.bg/article-5127542/>, (Accessed 15 March, 2017)

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Interior (In Bulgarian) 20.11.2013. Available at: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=2463407>, (Accessed 20 September, 2014)

<sup>10</sup> Dnevnik “Chirpanliev: V Bulgaria ot bezhantsite ostavat samo kyurdite, koito sa po-zle i ot nashite tsigani”(In Bulgarian) 23.11.2014. Available at: [http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/11/23/2424715\\_chirpanliev\\_v\\_bulgariia\\_ot\\_bejancite\\_ostavat\\_samo/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/11/23/2424715_chirpanliev_v_bulgariia_ot_bejancite_ostavat_samo/), (Accessed 15 November, 2015)

kind of hate speech was reflected by national media without been argued.

At present, almost every day there is national media coverage on asylum seekers/refugees in Bulgaria or in other European countries that continues the above mentioned trends. The increased number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan in 2015 has led to weak distinction of Afghans from the asylum seekers/refugee community as a whole. The clashes between Afghans and police in the camp in Harmanli in 2016 have created a new public definition for asylum seekers - ‘hooligans’. Still there is no journalist interest in depth to the Bulgarian official and unofficial policy on asylum, to the number of foreigners in Bulgaria, their integration, etc.

### ***Social attitudes and reactions - ‘Destroyed myth’ of the Bulgarian hospitality***

Since 2013, the negative public image of refugees has been constructed on a base of media information, negative rumors and stereotypes, hate speeches by the politicians and officials. Three trends of social attitudes can be observed:

- Lack of interest. In fact, only Bulgarians living in Sofia and Harmanli, and village of Banya, Nova Zagora municipality, have visible contacts and direct impressions on asylum seekers/ refugees, and for the rest of society the ‘new guests’ have remained a ‘distant’ problem. In September 2015, during field studies among Bulgarians in North Central Bulgaria an information about the readiness of local people to host asylum seekers has been collected. As a whole, Bulgarian residents were ready to donate clothes and belongings but not to ‘invite’ Syrian refugees to their villages (Ethnographic studies in Veliko Tarnovo region, September, 2015).

- Compassion. Parts of the Bulgarian society sympathize asylum seekers/ refugees and organize themselves to assist them during their arrival and stay. Observing the social media networks, it can be said

that the reaction of compassion is determined by emotional motives. A number of voluntary programs have been established, NGOs, Catholic, Protestant and Muslim religious institutions has oriented their social activities to support asylum seekers. The cultural and scientific community in Sofia has tried to draw attention to asylum seekers in a positive way. Conferences, seminars, and photographic exhibitions have been organized. Despite the difficult language communication, there are known single cases of Bulgarian families who provide shelter to the Syrian asylum seekers. Until 2015, the support initiatives were not well popularized but after that they attracted more and more young people from the country and abroad. At the end of 2016 the volunteer program ‘Mentors-friends’ held by Caritas-Sofia was chosen as the best initiative among 51 others within the national contest Voluntary Initiative 2016 Awards.

● Hostility. Since 2013, within the Bulgarian society, including ethnic minorities, descendants of Bulgarian and other refugees as well as people who had no direct or visual contact with asylum seekers, a negative attitude towards asylum seekers/refugees has been developed by different perceptions. On the one hand, the *old* ethnic negative stereotypes about traditional ethnic minorities of the Turks ‘as bearers of Islam’ and Roma – ‘dark and dirty’, ‘sick’, ‘destroyers’, ‘criminals’, ‘noisy people’, regarding their language, skin color, religion, etc. (Gergova 2012: 63; 89; 95-96; 122) have been attributed to the newcomers from the Middle East. On the other hand, *new* stereotypes can be observed under the influence of the terrorist attacks in America and Europe. The people from the Middle East are considered to be potential national security threat and they are labeled as ‘talibans’ and ‘terrorists’. This notion of refugees filled with xenophobia has led to different actions. A number of negative reactions ranging from speeches to physical violence can be given. During 2013 temporally unofficial civil patrol in Sofia was created to avoid the free movement of asylum seekers out of the camps. The Bulgarian hostility towards asylum seekers/refugees has its peaks: the cases of villages of Telish and

Rozovo (where the asylum seekers were not allowed to settled as a result of civil protests of the locals in 2013, 2014 and 2015), and Kalishte (where the refugee children were not allowed to study at the local school in 2015); the formation of volunteer unofficial patrols in the border area who arrested asylum seekers who entered illegally the country in 2016; the civil protest in front of one of the camps in Sofia in 2016 supported by leaders of nationalist political parties. Since 2013, the majority of political parties in order to mobilize and expand their electorate additionally have been popularized their negative positions to the Middle Eastern asylum seekers as a national security's issue. The official position of the Bulgarian Orthodox church has strengthened this negative social attitude towards asylum seekers/refugees. According to the Holy Synod's statement in 25 September 2015, compassion and solidarity towards asylum seekers have to be expressed, but the Bulgarian government should not accept more refugees<sup>11</sup>.

Although the efforts of citizens and different organizations to support the reception and integration of the asylum seekers/ refugees, the lack of proper public information on them, skewed media coverage, the use of old and new stereotypes and fears in the public, hate public speeches function as an anti-refugee mass propaganda.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the preparedness of the Bulgarian state and society to host and adopt refugees and foreigners, the modernity has given a new experience. The Ed. Said's finding, that even if the orientalist distinction between 'them' and 'us' is disregarded, today's knowledge is fill with political and ideological realities (1978: 327), is still actual. Since 2013, the increasing flow of asylum seekers has led to re-thinking of the readiness of state, society and media to realize its democratic policy and values. Beyond the official national policy, the anti-refugee

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<sup>11</sup> Bulgarian Patriarchy. *Izvanredno obrashtenie na Sv. Sinod na BPTS po povod krizata s bezhantsite*. 26 November 2016, Available at: <http://www.bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=184530>, (25 March, 2017).

public propaganda and attitudes are maintained by politicians, media and high-ranked officials, etc. Labeling as ‘Gypsies’ and ‘Terrorists’, the Middle Eastern newcomers in Bulgaria have become the newly stereotyped *Other*. The reports of different international and national nongovernmental organizations, the data of the voluntary organizations, aggressive reactions, and public hate speeches indicate the scale of traditional fears towards the Muslim world. The myth of Bulgarian hospitality and self-notions of ethnic tolerance have been destroyed.

Bulgaria is still a transit destination for asylum seekers movement. This transient place in near future depends on two factors: the Turkish government’s decision to ‘withhold’ the migration wave towards the EU countries and the German government’s intention to continue its ‘open door’ policy and to not implement the so-called to ‘Dublin transfers’. In the context of ongoing movement from the Middle East to Europe, migrant smuggling, limited reception and integration possibilities, the Bulgarian government will face even more the necessity of reformulation of its policy on asylum between the society’s expectations and international legal commitments.

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