Ildiko Otova

State and policy failure concerning refugees in Bulgaria: Dynamics, trends and paradoxes

Abstract

The change of political regime in Bulgaria after 1989 drastically altered the country's migration picture. It can be asserted positively that the number of emigrating individuals still exceeds the number of immigrants who have made their choice of Bulgaria as a country of reception. However, material provided by researchers, demonstrating that immigration is radically different from the classical phenomenon in western Europe, is at sharp variance with the manner in which the topic has been reflected in the domestic political and public discourse. This article examines the refugee phenomenon of Bulgaria against this context, seeking to highlight the failures of Bulgarian politics and policy development process. Politicians have ruthlessly exploited the topic in their desire to generate an ever-present sense of crisis, and crisis management, which not only covers up their own shortcomings but also acts to prevent the making of real policies, creating a gap into which NGOs have been forced to step. These, in turn, pose the real threat to national security insofar as Bulgaria remains unprepared to face subsequent migration.

Keywords: *migration, refugees, reception system, integration policies, populism, political process*

Introduction

The change of political regime in Bulgaria after 1989 brought changes also to the picture of migration. While the communist Bulgarian state stringently monitored those exiting and entering its territory, and controlled mobility even within its own national boundaries, emigration proved to be among the determining social phenomena in the years of democratic changes.

One of the biggest problems facing migration research in Bulgaria is the absence of trustworthy data. Nevertheless, the number of individuals leaving Bulgaria still dramatically exceed the country's number of immigrants: an Open Society study from 2017 indicates that Bulgarians residing abroad number about 1.1 million individuals, with 6-700,000 having left the country for economic reasons (Angelov and Lessenski 2017). Such research material sharply varies with the manner in which migration is reflected in the political discourse which not only utilises radically different data but also projects emigration as demographic collapse and even as national catastrophe. Consequently, it is largely perceived as such within public attitudes. Against this background, immigration appears insignificant and radically different from the phenomenon experienced in western Europe (Krasteva 2013). The total

number of immigrants does not exceed 1 per cent of the population and research studies have shown the majority to be extremely well integrated (Krasteva 2013). This, however, renders it equally 'invisible' to politicians who, sooner or later, bring the issue into the public policy domain, as well as to citizens who, for the course of the two decades or so following the democratic changes up to 2015, never articulated it as a problem given the obvious lack of reasons to do so.

A considerable reversal in the long-term trend in refugee numbers ensued when it turned out that Bulgaria lay on the so-called 'Balkan Route' for refugees, during what was described as the greatest migration crisis in Europe since the Second World War. However, the number of refugee applications has now more or less reverted to the long-term trend although the nature and tone of the public discourse has been sharply changed.

This article examines the refugee phenomenon in Bulgaria in this context by exploring its dynamics, as well as the major trends and paradoxes. Each of the sections below looks in turn at these aspects before a conclusion summarises the lessons that have been learned as well as how these might influence the future direction of migration policy.

Dynamics

There are two directions in which refugee dynamics might be set out: the first is purely statistical and pertains to the quantitative dimensions of the phenomenon – the simple number of asylum seekers; while the second involves institutional considerations and the changes brought about within the system for the reception of asylum seekers.

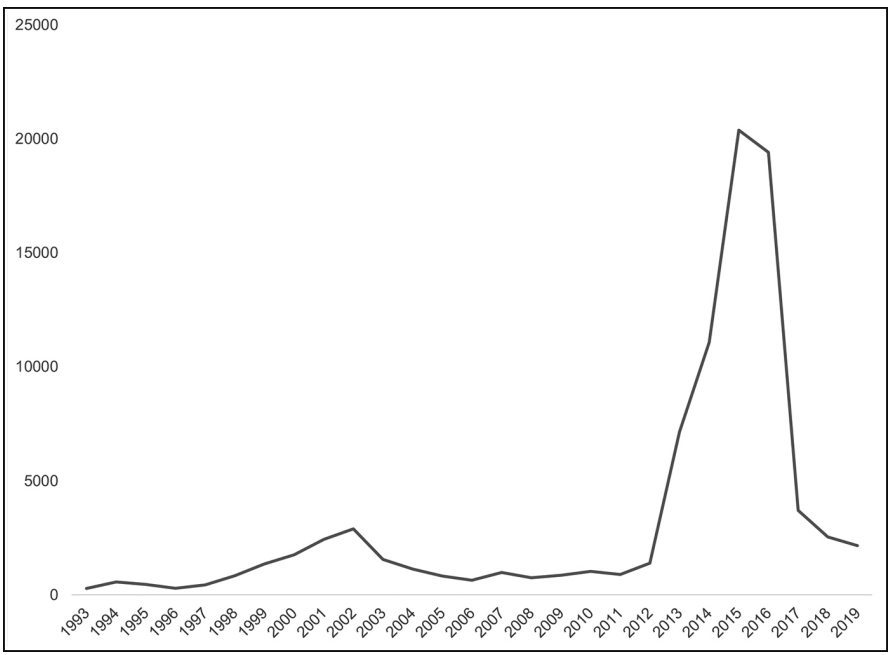
Quantitative aspects

Asylum was the first and actually best developed field of migration policy in the initial years of the post-1989 democratic transition even though the number of asylum seekers prior to the 2015 refugee crisis was insignificant. Before 2000, the numbers vacillated between 250 and 1,000. A relative apex ensued in 2002, when 2,888 asylum applications were submitted – ten times the number of submissions in 1993, when the keeping of statistics commenced. Even back then, the scale of the refugee flow was neither perceived as menacing nor was it seen to exceed the capacity of the existing institutional infrastructure set up in Bulgaria to handle refugees.

There were numerous forecasts predicting that Bulgaria would attract waves of refugees following the country's 2007 accession to the EU. This development failed to materialise in the years up to 2010 with the numbers for the period remaining below 1,000 each year. However, the numbers of applications increased by a factor of six between 2012 and 2013. The peak occurred in 2015, which saw 20,391 people apply for asylum – an unprecedented number for Bulgaria. The following year was marked by a halt in the increase and even a slight decline in the number of asylum seekers, although numbers remained much higher than they were prior to the peak. Since then, the numbers have fallen as rapidly as they rose, to a level only just above the long-term number.

The result of this sharp peak in the number of asylum applications was that new arrivals to the country had to face a situation of institutional collapse, political and media ostracism and growing social tensions (Otova and Staykova 2019).

Figure 1 – Asylum applicants, 1993-2019



Source: Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees

Institutional considerations

Upon signing the Geneva Convention in 1993, Bulgaria joined the family of asylum granting countries. As early as 1992, the National Office on Territorial Asylum and Refugees was established at the Council of Ministers. In 2000, the Office was upgraded into an Agency for Refugees and, as of 2002, the State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers (SAR) was designated as the government institution occupied with matters pertaining to refugees.

In 1997, the first centre for the registration and reception of asylum seekers and refugees opened in the village of Banya, while 2001 saw the opening of the registration and reception centre in the Ovcha Kupel district of Sofia, followed by the Pastrogor transit centre in the municipality of Svilengrad, southern Bulgaria, in 2008. Prior to 2012-2013, the reception system was more or less stable and was of little interest other than a few international and national humanitarian organisations (Otova and Staykova 2019).

The government of Bulgaria adopted a plan in response to the mounting migratory pressures on 16 April 2014 – almost a year after the actual onset of the crisis. In this connection, the incumbent Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Tsvetlin Yovchev, commented as follows:

> We have reckoned with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the middle east. It is understood that refugee accommodation facilities in locations nearby to Syria would have exceeded their capacity by now and it falls to our country to face once again heightened migratory pressures. This risk is [considered] currently [a matter] of no urgent actuality but eventually, and within a few upcoming months, it may happen. It is because of this [eventuality] that we must be in readiness.

He further announced that no new camps were projected for construction, but that the government planned to obviate another crisis by securing new beds in existing facilities:

> This buffer is to be installed at the accommodation locations, although not presently. (*Monitor*, 17 April 2014).[1]

We should remind ourselves that what was estimated by the government not to be actually an urgent risk materialised into 20,391 asylum applications in 2015, nearly twice the number of the preceding year.

By early 2013, the total capacity of the reception centres had comprised 805 places, distributed as follows: 425 places in the Sofia facility; 80 in the reception centre of Banya, central Bulgaria; and 300 at the Pastrogor transit centre in the border area with Turkey and Greece (Asylum Information Database (AIDA) 2013). This overall capacity proved rather insufficient with the numbers of arriving asylum seekers on the increase well past mid-2013. AIDA summarised the situation very accurately:

> Until the beginning of September 2013, inside less than 25 days, the two available reception centres … along with the transit centre … ended up severely overcrowded and overloaded to such an extent that [the situation] caused the total institutional collapse of SAR. The management of SAR reception sites was tasked with housing between eight and fifteen new arrivals of asylum seekers in rooms designed to hold a maximum of two to four people. To save space, families – including those with children – were separated in violation of the regulations of the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and of the National Family Code. In early September 2013, having exhausted all possibilities for in-room housing, SAR took to 'accommodating' new arrivals on mattresses in the corridors of reception establishments. Insufficient capacity at SAR-provided reception sites necessitated the conversion of detention facilities in the Regional Border Police Directorate in Elhovo region, a south-eastern area on the border with Turkey and a major entry point for new arrivals into Bulgaria, for use as accommodation facilities which were rapidly overcrowded. This prompted the Border Police to repurpose various other premises into accommodation facilities for arriving asylum seekers, or to redirect asylum seekers for housing reasons to detention centres for illegitimate migrants at Lyubimets, a smaller settlement within the Svilengrad border

1 All translations from original Bulgarian language sources are by the author.

> zone, and at Busmantsi, a small municipality near Sofia. Thus, these detention sites, which serve the purposes of enforced deportation procedures and are therefore built as closed facilities, were used to house elderly, sick and injured people, as well as numerous families with children. A new detention centre, labelled provisionally a 'distribution centre', entered operation in Elhovo on 8 October 2013, with its housing capacity for 300 people immediately exhausted. (Asylum Information Database 2013)

To cope with the situation, the State Agency for Refugees opened new accommodation facilities, more particularly several so-called 'provisional accommodation centres' in the Vrazhdebna district of Sofia in September 2013 and, a few weeks later, in the capital's Voenna Rampa district. The former had the capacity to house 420 people with the latter housing 500.

None of these facilities were designed to serve these designated purposes and living conditions were the subject of criticism from human rights organisations. On account of the conditions in asylum seeker reception facilities, which had sparked protests across immigrant communities, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee even demanded the resignation of the government. An open letter by Mrs. Margarita Ilieva, Director of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Legal Programme, reads as follows:

> On their visits made on 3 and 8 October 2013 at the accommodation centres for foreign nationals at the Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna locations in Sofia, the BHC emissaries encountered the following situation:
>
> 1. Numerous individuals at the Vrazhdebna facility have testified that officers carrying out interviews with asylum seekers have threatened to prolong indefinitely the procedure of granting refugee status for those asylum seekers whom the security police unit stationed on the premises indicated as instigators of the protests and unless asylum seekers desist from complaining and protesting (…)
>
> 2. The protest of the asylum seekers at the Vrazhdebna Centre was prompted by the appalling housing conditions in which they were accommodated: (…) No medical personnel stationed on the premises. (…) Heating unavailable. (…) Insufficient food – canned food provided once a week or once in ten days. As for essential commodities for daily supply, such as bread and others, immigrants were supposed to procure them on their own, usually through food donations. (…) No SAR officials available on location. As reported by the police unit in charge of the facility, SAR personnel had last made a visit to the premises at the beginning of September. (…) The situation at the Voenna Rampa facility is no different.
>
> The housing conditions in the locations amount to the inhumane/degrading treatment of refugees, in violation of Article 3 of the European Convention for Human Rights. They also constitute a grave infringement of Article 29(1) of the Asylum and Refugees Act, which specifies that asylum seekers have the explicit right to shelter and food and access to free medical and psychological assistance. In this sense, the authorities have completely abdicated from legality.
>
> The BHC classifies this crisis as the radical institutionalised violation of fundamental human rights. The crisis involving the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers from Syria is the biggest human rights crisis to occur in Bulgaria since the beginning of 2013. The incumbent government, which appoints the SAR management, is responsible for the crisis and is therefore bound to submit its resignation.[2]

2 The Director of the State Agency for Refugees was dismissed from office in October 2013.

Meanwhile, a third centre for temporary accommodation opened in Harmanli using the facilities of a former military base with the capacity to house 450 people. AIDA reported even worse on-location conditions:

> With asylum seekers placed in a confinement regime and accommodated in tents and 'containers' lacking electricity and sewerage, under extremely poor living and hygienic conditions and at the heightened risk of epidemics. (Asylum Information Database 2013)

Criticism of the treatment of asylum seekers was also expressed in a Human Rights Watch report announced in Sofia in April 2014. Tsvetlin Yovchev decried the allegations as 'outright falsehoods and libels against Bulgaria', while the director of the State Agency for Refugees, Nikolay Chirpanliev, described the organisation as 'a bunch of morons, liars and swindlers, misleading public opinion in an impudent, cynical and dishonest way'. (*Capital Daily*, 30 April 2014).

In subsequent years, living conditions in the reception facilities have gradually reached acceptable standards, mainly with support from European funds and from donations by international organisations.

In August 2016, however, a mass brawl broke out between Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers at the Harmanli centre. On 24 November, provisional restrictions placed on free movement in and out of the same centre generated further riots. In the weeks preceding this incident, rumours had been afloat in the community that there was an outbreak of infectious disease at the centre. Despite the repeated reassurance of the authorities that the situation was not epidemiologically dangerous or capable of affecting employees in the centre or town residents, and that it involved standard cases of chickenpox, a disease typical in Bulgaria, Harmanli residents demanded that the authorities enforce medical examinations on the premises and that the media should attend them. The riots resulted in 400 Afghan and Iraqi nationals being placed under detention, 1,000 people being removed from the facility and 24 police officers injured. Following the riots, a new director was appointed and further reorganisations were carried out at the centre.

Detention centres in Bulgaria (located at Busmantsi, Lyubimets and Elhovo)[3] are under the administration of the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior. After 2016, asylum seekers can also be placed in closed reception facilities under the jurisdiction of the State Agency for Refugees while the settlement of their claim is in progress. This legislative amendment also accounts for the Harmanli riots and the reactions of several political actors.

In September 2017, the government introduced so-called 'statutory movement zones' comprising the geographical environs surrounding any given reception centre. Asylum seekers may request permission to leave the zone; where the request is rejected, reasons must be given. Permission is not required in cases where asylum seekers have to report to a court or another public authority, or if they are in need of emergency medical assistance (Otova and Staykova 2019).

3 No longer operational since 2017.

Three registration and reception centres were operating as of 2018, with these being used for registration, accommodation and the conduct of procedures in the interior of the country. These include:

- Harmanli registration and reception centre
- Banya registration and reception centre
- Sofia registration and reception centre, with three sub-divisions located in the districts of Ovcha Kupel, Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa.

Following the November 2016 riots at Harmanli, the authorities began to accommodate individuals from different nationalities in different facilities: Voenna Rampa is inhabited by Afghan and Pakistani asylum seekers, as well as single Iraqis; Ovcha Kupel houses mainly families from Syria, Iraq and Africa; as well as exceptions, such as nationals of Myanmar; the occupants of Vrazhdebna are also single Syrian nationals and there are no families there. The accommodation of asylum seekers at Harmanli are also allocated according to ethnicity or nationality principles.

The authorities often have asylum seekers arriving in Sofia from Harmanli escorted back to their original accommodation location. According to a statement made by a SAR operative, refugees have a preference for Sofia as a place of residence because it is seen to afford better chances to contact traffickers who might assist their departure from the country rather than any essential differences in handling asylum seekers between the two locations. In compliance with the system of statutory movement zones in force, asylum seekers are allowed to move freely anywhere in Sofia but, if they are apprehended a second time outside their zone without permission, and where a record of the infringement is drawn up, the authorities are empowered to return them to a confined centre. A new closed-type centre installed by the State Agency for Refugees, with capacity to accommodate 60 people, is already operational in Sofia.

Assessment

Consequently, whereas the initial collapse of the reception system prompted the opening of more accommodation centres, but with almost no essential changes effected in procedural management, the Harmanli incidents led to no fewer than three innovations: the ethnic principle of accommodating asylum seekers in view of avoiding conflicts between different nationalities; the possibilities of establishing closed-type centres under the jurisdiction of the State Agency for Refugees[4] after 2016; and the enforcement after 2017 of so-called statutory movement zones restricting the right of movement for asylum seekers within limited geographic boundaries.

Such measures were adopted on an *ad hoc* and post-event basis; and, rather than effecting essential changes in the governance of the reception system, they were devised to surmount recurrent tensions and placate public opinion which had been stirred up with the participation of various political actors.

In this respect, the dynamics of the changes in reception system policies in the 1990s were not directly associated with the prevailing number of asylum seekers and

4 Until that point, closed-type centres operated only under the jurisdiction of the Direction of Migration of the Ministry of the Interior.

migration flows but were related to the overall process of the democratisation of Bulgarian society and institutions; and, at a later stage, also the process of EU accession. Nevertheless, due to a lack of planning and a number of other institutional setbacks, crystallised in the process of the rather formal utilisation of European funds and the apparent synchronisation of statutory acts and practices rather than in an essential upgrading of management capacity and investment in a stable system, the post-2012 situation found Bulgaria completely unprepared. The subsequent changes were certainly related to the dynamics of migration flows but they were, nevertheless, belated and clearly not proactive. One of the major drawbacks of these measures is that they were intended to address certain public expectations in reaction to events arising out of the political process and not with the purpose of instituting effective policies and a stable system.

Trends

There are two major trends which will be emphasised in this section: security aspects; and the dominance of populism/s.

Security aspects

The first official strategy document concerned with migration in Bulgaria originated in 2008. Work on the development of a new migration strategy began as early as 2010 before being subsequently adopted in 2011. The 2008 Strategy centred mainly on migration in economic terms, and specifically on the integration of foreign nationals in Bulgaria, but the new one put the emphasis primarily on security issues (Krasteva 2011).

At present, the main policy-making document in the field is the *National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration 2015-2020*, which states its purpose in the following terms:

> Establishing a political framework for developing a complex and stable statutory and institutional basis for the effective governance of legal migration and integration, as well as for the prevention and countering of illegal migration, and for identifying and providing the necessary care to individuals who seek and have received international protection in Bulgaria. (National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration, 2015-2020)

The most striking embodiment of the security aspects of this process is a physical one: the construction of a fence along the Turkish border commenced in October 2013 and ended in 2017. In the intervening years, this has become a permanent source of political scandal which, far from handling the question of whether at all the fence should exist, has focused on issues such as the high construction costs, its conformity with quality standards and suspicions of corruption and inadequate efficiency. In October 2017, the Deputy Prime Minister publicly affirmed that migrants continued to get into the country through the fence using climbing contraptions and that the ongoing smuggling and trafficking of human beings was being compounded by corruption on the part of the staff of Bulgarian border law enforcement units. This statement is fully in line with reports from asylum seekers that Bulgarian Border Po-

lice officers have repeatedly facilitated migrants trespassing the EU's external border in return for a bribe. A documentary published in November 2017 by a member of an opposition party showed that migration control along the Bulgarian-Turkish border was being enforced selectively, while also challenging the efficacy of the border fence as well as providing facts about refugee trafficking in the direction of Europe via Bulgaria, allegedly with the co-operation of the Border Police.

Migrants and even some official institutional representatives have reported in numerous conversations[5] of traffickers hanging around accommodation centres and all this happening with the full awareness of the authorities. In this respect, the politics of closed borders, within which the securitisation concerns have surfaced, paradoxically find a physical visualisation in the wire-netting installation, the subject of extensive political talk but yet to be installed in practice,[6] while ingresses into the country are still possible due to corruption while migrants leaving the country are tolerated by the authorities and even encouraged.

Growth of populism

The policy-making process, especially in the realm of migration, but not only there, takes place within a context which is dominated by populist discourse. Very often it emanates not only from individuals within extremist political parties domestically but from certain actors in mainstream circles as well. Meanwhile, European institutions and non-governmental organisations strive to do little more than achieve a balance in this discourse.

No fewer than seven governments have been in power in Bulgaria since the onset of the post-2013 refugee crisis which, on the face of it, largely suggests a discontinuity in the process of response. Interestingly enough, even in the face of such a level of discontinuity, the overall comprehension of the governance of the reception system has shown no significant differences, and even less so in the realm of migration policies.

One significant example is Decree 208 of August 2016 on the *Conditions and Procedures for Conclusion, Enforcement and Termination* provides for an agreement on the integration of foreign nationals who have been granted asylum or international protection. Superficially, the document attempted to implement a decentralised response in the realm of refugee integration, making provisions for the active involvement of local municipalities through which funding would be channelled to carry out refugee integration by providing them with housing, schooling for children, kindergartens and work. According to voices from within nationalist parties, however, rather than regulating the integration of foreign nationals who have already acquired refugee status, the main focus of the document was illegal immigrants:

> There is a semi-secret decree of the Council of Ministers concerning illegal immigrants. The issue at hand is that some municipalities should be enabled to accommodate illegal migrants. (*Frognews*, 10 October 2016)

5 Data from the author's field work.

6 The actual decrease in the number of migrant entries on the territory of Bulgaria can be traced to a much greater extent to the relevant agreement concluded between EU and Turkey.

The emergent 'front' against the Decree – which, besides nationalists, also included representatives of other parties, including the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) – has demonstrated in reality how the making of politics kills policy-making. Not a single municipality participated in the programme and the decree was repealed by the interim government, appointed by the incoming President, a nominee of the BSP, although the same government had adopted a text featuring no substantial alterations to the previous document. The succeeding GERB government adopted yet another version of the text which again lacked any essential improvements and which were drawn up within intradepartmental committees which did not comprise all concerned actors and which also failed to include a diverse range of partners.

An Alpha Research survey from October 2013 indicated that 83 per cent of the population voiced concerns of the risk to the country's security posed by the growing numbers of refugees (Alpha Research 2013). Such a position was held by most socio-demographic groups. Another sociological survey carried out by Alpha Research (2016) showed that 61 per cent of Bulgarians believed that migrants posed the most dangerous external threat to national security; while the Eurobarometer of November that year showed that 77 per cent were set against the resettlement of third-country nationals in Bulgaria (European Commission 2016).

One case that achieved significance was the reaction of townsfolk in Belene toward a Syrian family seeking asylum granted refugee status under a resettlement programme and the death threats made to a local Catholic priest who had lent support to them. The case was not the only one of its kind: some weeks before, similar incidents had occurred in small towns such as Elin Pelin and Shiroka Lyka. During the presidential election campaign (September-December 2016), there were more than ten protest rallies against the settlement of migrants held in various places, among them refugee centre locations such as Sofia Ovcha Kupel and Harmanli, while other municipalities such as Varna, Burgas, Russe, Samokov and Yambol joined them. In some cases, the coordination of such protest rallies used straightforward support from representatives of political forces (those from the Patriotic Front; later called United Patriots) or from formal and informal nationalist movements (the National Resistance Group; or groups associated with the so-called 'refugee hunters', which had achieved a certain notoriety); other cases involved some representatives of certain mainstream political parties including the BSP.

The leader of one of the member parties in United Patriots commented: 'We were not fomenting [unrest]; we organised citizens' protest rallies for them' (*Vesti*, 28 November 2016). Voices from within these parties also maintain a clear opinion as to where accommodation facilities for migrants should be located:

> We insist that [refugee] camps be located on the border strip guarded by the military, outside populated settlements and [that they should be] of the closed type. How sensible is it to encamp illegal migrants, overtly aggressive and unmanageable [folk], within mere metres of schools, universities and kindergartens, as is the case with the Ovcha Kupel [facility] in Sofia? (*Flagman*, 18 September 2016)

The scope for radicalising citizens was quickly instrumentalised by political actors. Populist and extremist parties are the most successful at exploiting the topic in

response to societal attitudes, although they are not alone in doing that. The two trends explored in this section, however, act in an interconnected way, mutually reinforcing each another. Fears accumulated in society facilitate populist and eurosceptic parties, effectively making them recognisable by some as defenders of the national cause. At the same time, the same parties deftly fuel and amplify civic fears, creating an extra sense of insecurity and incapability, fabricating news stories or exaggerating the existing risks. 'Waves', 'huge masses' and replacement theory – all this phrasing is part of the verbal weaponry used to intensify these perceptions.

With member states failing to achieve a resolution on the revision of the Common European Asylum System during the Bulgarian Presidency in the first half of 2018, the issue was tackled during a debate in the Bulgarian National Assembly – not surprisingly, with migration as its focus. The issue was the subject of detailed discussions in two parliamentary sessions and encompassed a parliamentary resolution. The verbatims reported below were enunciated by figures from various political parties, both in power and in opposition (National Assembly Protocol 13/20 July 2018):

> Boyko Borisov, Prime Minister:
>
> Considering where our problem lies, I should tell you that the real problem is not with illegal, but with legal migration, since with [the documents] we signed upon accession to the European Union, the Geneva Convention and all that, any individual who arrives at our border and shows up at an official checkpoint requesting asylum, we are obliged to grant asylum to that individual. From the moment this document is issued to the individual [to whom status is granted], this individual is considered 'ours' – I say 'ours' in the sense that in case he is denied reception in Germany or Austria or so on, there is nowhere else he can go [but to return to us].
>
> Volen Siderov, Ataka Political Party (United Patriots):
>
> As for the summit on migration, I believe there is no one here, in this hall, whether from opposition or governing parties, if they would be straight-thinking statesmen, to claim that [the summit] was not a success for Bulgaria, provided that we have explicitly declared that we have no wish to be a buffer zone. If we stick to this position in the future, and if it receives the support of each and every party in parliament, then it is bound to yield some results for Bulgaria. Moreover, if the head of state, elected in a direct vote by the people, also joins in this support, I believe that the effect will be even greater.
>
> Cornelia Ninova, BSP *[*addressing the government in her capacity as leader of the opposition*]*
>
> You have nothing to say, because Bulgaria has no position [on the migrant problem] – no such thing was voted by parliament; no such thing was adopted by the Council of Ministers. What we have here is [the prime minister's] personal emotions and intentions, [articulated] in conformity with what the current situation dictates. [When he talks] here, in Bulgaria, he would have none of [the migrants] come, but with Merkel he is all for their coming. Therefore, we insist on more statesmanship [on his part], as well as to have a resolution voted by the Parliament of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Council of Ministers.

Upon a motion drafted by the Socialist Party, the debates concluded with a vote on a three-point resolution:

> The National Assembly (...) has RESOLVED:
>
> 1. The Council of Ministers is charged to refrain from signing any bilateral agreements concerning the re-admission of migrants.
>
> 2. The Council of Ministers is tasked to submit to the National Assembly a position concerning the general (joint) resolution of the European Union on migration issues.
>
> 3. The Council of Ministers is charged to submit to the National Assembly Bulgaria's proposals for alterations to the so-called Dublin System for the reception of refugees and in particular Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council from 26 June 2013.

There were 177 members of parliament in attendance at the session; and all 177 signed the resolution (Minute Records of the National Assembly, 20 July 2018).

Like migration, populism made its way into Bulgarian politics at a relatively late stage but has settled permanently in it, effectively becoming a dominant fixture. Some analysts believe that including far-right parties in government cabinets serves the purpose of their domestication, but the process has actually resulted in the corruption of the views of classical parties when closely exposed to extreme ideologies. Stanley (2008) proposed the term 'thin ideology', suggesting that the way to study populism is to view it in its interaction with classical ideologies because, in itself, it offers neither solutions nor a comprehensive policy agenda. At the same time, as stated by Stoker and Hay (2017), the (stealth) populist demand is for a democracy that 'delivers what people want' and which could be also understood in terms of Mudde's 'responsive government' (Mudde 2004). Alternatively, as we might express it – a government shaping policies in compliance with what looks like prevailing public opinion.

European studies comprehend politicisation as the process of attributing significance to an issue of public interest via diverse channels such as media and political discourse, as well as the multiplicity and variety of opinions pertaining to it being taken in evidence (Wilde 2011, 2016). The process of politicising the refugee topic in Bulgaria has taken place not in the context of broad public debate attended by a variety of viewpoints but, on the contrary: by the reproduction of negative speech within a dominant populist discourse. Political actors tend to exploit the topic extensively, themselves often becoming a source of 'fake news' and generating a sense of ongoing crisis in the process.

Paradoxes

Paradoxically, although Bulgaria has practically harmonised its asylum approval legislation with that of the European Union, one can hardly speak of a Europeanisation of the migration topic but, rather, about its nationalisation and the shutting down of local debate.

In periods of intensive discussions on quota allocation, Bulgarian society fell repeatedly into confusion over the conflicting statements made by government officials

in Brussels compared to political discourse intended for domestic consumption. There is a particular example of so-called 'hotspots'.[7] On 24 September 2015, the Prime Minister took unprecedented advantage of his right to address the nation over public television to assure that no deployment of hotspots across the country was forthcoming and that he had defended the national interest at the session of the Council of the European Union held one day earlier. It was Chancellor Angela Merkel who reported the top news from the session: Bulgaria had volunteered a proposition to allow the instalment of hotspots across its territory on the grounds of experiencing substantial migratory pressure.

The opposition has been similarly inconsistent in its usage of a language custom-tailored to the varying junctures of foreign and domestic discourse: 'Brussels talk vs. Belene talk.' In this respect, the leader of the Socialist Party often invokes migration in rather critical terms:

> Until now, it was Merkel who was telling [migrants] to come [to her country] and receive help, but now it is Borisov inviting them to come and avail themselves of dwellings, schools, a personal physician, social insurance and employment. This is a direct invitation for [migrants] to start arriving, [a pledge] that we would have their lives arranged for them... (*cross.bg*, 27 September 2016)

Meanwhile, Sergei Stanishev, President of the Party of European Socialists since November 2011, MEP since 1014 and chair of the Bulgarian Socialist Party from 2001-2014, upholds a very different position:

> We need to develop a coordinated action plan with the EU in order to cope with the increasing influx of migrants. (…) Although tending to beget challenges, migration nevertheless can offer numerous opportunities for the enrichment of our continent in its cultural, economic and social aspect. Migrants can play a vital role in reviving the economy of an aging Europe. (*offnews*, 10 October 2013)

The European Union has seen its role mostly reduced to being a donor of financial resources. In preceding sections of this article, we have drawn attention to the citations of institutional representatives highlighting an often negative attitude towards the non-governmental sector and international organisations. However, without assistance from Europe, and without the active participation of international organisations, the reception system would have found it extremely hard to carry out its duties. International organisations have had to take on the functions of faulty policies, thereby generating a 'task fulfilled' perception which in itself acts to absolve the state of its (future) responsibilities.

The second paradox is, in contrast, a positive one. In the context of the trends towards securitisation and the dominance of populist talk outlined above, and in the absence of genuine debate, the only counterbalance can be found in displays of civil solidarity.

7 EU-run registration centres hosted by front-line states intended to speed up the processing of asylum requests. Centres have been established in Sicily and in Piraeus; one in Bulgaria would mean it was treated similarly as Italy and Greece, given its border with Turkey.

Solidarity has found a place of its own in a situation marked by dominant anti-immigrant sentiment through non-government organisations and informal networks. Social networks, a wave of civic mobilisations and novel forms of civil spirit have projected a vibrant image of solidaristic citizens manifesting support for asylum-seekers. Equally interesting is the role which 'veteran migrants' (migrants of older standing) – few in number but, nevertheless, well integrated – have played.

Refugees and *Friends of the Refugees* – an informal group of volunteers – won the 2013 Person of the Year Award: an award of some distinction made by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Part of the citation for the nomination reads as follows:

> A group of volunteers has taken to heart the fate of refugees. Within a few days, they organised donation campaigns. Their [way of handling] logistics could be the pride of any government agency. Their campaigns for collection of essential commodities for refugees boast expedience, relevance and a specificity of purpose, and happen in a flash. They use their own vehicles, collect donations in their spare time [using] their own offices and storehouses [as collecting depots], do shopping and ring up contacts from their personal phones. Their supporters are growing in number at the speed of an avalanche. They have been instrumental in changing attitudes and prejudices. (*Dnevnik*, 13 October 2013)

Friends of the Refugees originated as a Facebook group, becoming engaged, alongside donation actions and campaigns, in specific cases: from securing prams for babies to procuring a doctor who is fluent in Arabic; or from responding to requests to secure rented lodgings to filtering advertisements of employers willing to hire immigrants.

In the early months of the crisis, the volunteers contrived ways in which to arrogate the functions of a state which has defaulted from its duties, and thus render practical assistance to asylum seekers – ranging from food to clothing and sanitary materials. Numerous campaigns, mostly organised via social networks, have made up for the state's default position of lack when it comes to social measures, and for the simply unavailable assistance in legal and psychological areas. Practically, every measure that was made unavailable has been adopted by non-institutional partners. A report for Eurocities highlights this key role being played by NGOs:

> The mobilization of the organizations of civil society in the early months of the 2015 refugee crisis has served as an essential supplement to public action. Volunteers are still in position to play a crucial role as city communities set out to adapt their educational infrastructure to accommodate the growing numbers of students and tackling shortages of qualified personnel. This involves, in particular, language learning, the provision of general information and orientation on education for asylum seekers in reception centres, as well as basic education for asylum seekers who must wait for several weeks or even for months on end before they are registered in the system. (Eurocities 2017, cited in Krasteva 2017)

At the beginning of this analysis, it was mentioned that the immigration picture in Bulgaria is atypical – small and well-integrated immigrant communities remain unnoticeable to society. The majority are well integrated into the labour market; some are owners of small and medium-sized businesses. The Syrian community in Bulgaria shares similar characteristics. With the crisis in full swing, the assistance

they rendered to new arrivals had the effect of being a lifesaver. This can be illustrated in two pen pictures:

> *He* is the owner of a fast-food franchise in Bulgaria. In the early months of the crisis, he endeavoured to supply food and drink items to new arrivals by means of regular donations. For years, he has given employment to many asylum seekers and individuals who were granted asylum status while continuing to supply humanitarian aid to the SAR centres.
>
> *She* is one of the most active members of the Syrian community in Bulgaria and a volunteer invariably at the forefront from the initial stage of the crisis. In subsequent years, she never stopped working to provide help to refugee centres through various campaigns and non-governmental organisations, later also expanding her range of activities to the centres in Greece.

Conclusion

Migration has undoubtedly been one of the most sensitive topics on Europe's agenda for decades. In Bulgaria, however, the topic did not take its rightful place in political discourse until relatively recently with the refugee phenomenon, despite undergoing institutionalisation early on, remaining rather invisible.

Subsequently, the specifics of migration policy in a country in which emigration had been traumatically experienced in recent years presuppose the introduction of the topic at the very point at which the reception system for asylum seekers was facing collapse, and it was this that precisely set the tone for the public and political debate. The concerns of the population lacking exposure to conspicuous migrant communities were largely understandable and quickly instrumentalised by political parties ranging within a wide spectrum. Mutually amplifying trends have also created an entirely negative environment in which the quality of public debate has reflected a set of characteristics that has been politicised and which are themselves entirely negative. Meanwhile, political actors have ruthlessly exploited the topic in their own campaigns to generate an ever-present sense of crisis, and crisis management, in Bulgaria to cover up their own shortcomings.

In fact, the actual danger proceeds rather precisely from the process of politicisation and this sustained sense of crisis which, together, act to prevent the making of real policies and which themselves pose a threat to national security insofar as Bulgaria remains unprepared to face subsequent migration waves.

The dynamics, trends and paradoxes of the refugee phenomenon experienced in Bulgaria that we have set out in this article can best be summarised in the following way:

- notwithstanding that the refugee phenomenon was the earliest to be institutionalised, the Bulgarian state proved to be ultimately unprepared for the sharp increase in asylum seeker numbers
- synchronising the legislation with European statutory acts has failed to effect a radical improvement in the actual conditions of reception given the absence of political will
- the Europeanisation of [national] policies has proceeded amidst a double standard in political discourse, enhanced by processes inside the EU proper

- the discontinuity of the political process has failed to bring about radical changes in the logic of public policies dominated as they are by the processes and concerns of securitisation, dominant populism and the accumulation of negative societal responses originating with political actors from different parts of the spectrum
- non-government organisations, international organisations and informal networks have taken on the functions of which the state has abrogated responsibility, engendering a sense of 'job done'
- the apparent lull in this post-crisis period has led to a de-responsibilisation of the institutions, but also to a permanent state of crisis which may become a part of the politicisation process at any moment, with a deleterious impact on actual policy development.

References

Alpha Research (2013) 'Social Attitudes' opinion research, October, accessed 29 October 2020 (in Bulgarian) at: https://alpharesearch.bg/userfiles/file/1013_Public_Opinion_Alpha%20Research.pdf.

Alpha Research (2016) 'Social Attitudes' opinion research, September, accessed 29 October 2020 (in Bulgarian) at: https://alpharesearch.bg/post/906-obshtestveni-naglasi-septemvri-2016.html.

Angelov, Georgi and Marin Lessenski (2017) '10 Years in EU: Migration Trends in Bulgaria' Sofia: Open Society Institute – Sofia, accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://osis.bg/?p=392&lang=en.

Asylum Information Database (Aida) 'Country Reports for Bulgaria' 2013 and 2017, accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria.

Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees (2020) 'Number of applicants for international protection and decisions taken in the period 1993-2019', accessed 29 October 2020 at: http://www.aref.government.bg/index.php/en/node/179.

European Commission (2016) 'Autumn 2016 Standard Eurobarometer: Immigration and terrorism continue to be seen as the most important issues facing the EU', press release, accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_4493.

Kaltwasser, C. R (2012) 'The ambivalence of populism: Threat and corrective for democracy' *Democratization* 19(2): 184-208.

Krasteva, A (with the collaboration of E. Staykova and I. Otova) (2011) 'Satisfying labor demand through migration in Bulgaria 2004-2009' European Migration Network accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/reports/docs/emn-studies/labour-demand/03.bulgaria_national_report_satisfying_labour_demand_throug_migration_final_version_28january2011.pdf.

Krasteva, A (2013) 'Bulgarian migration profile' Anna Krasteva blog, 21 March, accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://annakrasteva.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/bulgarian-migration-profile/.

Krasteva, A (with the collaboration of E. Staykova, V. Ivanova, I. Otova and D. Kamenova) (2017) *Policy of immigrant integration in a situation of populist securitization: the case of education of the most vulnerable – the refugee children* ReCriRe project report.

Krasteva, A (2018) 'Hyperpoliticisation of asylum and responsibility: The Bulgarian case: from polarisation to hegemonisation' CEASEVAL research on the Common European Asylum System, No. 15, accessed 29 October 2020 at: http://ceaseval.eu/publications/15_Krasteva_WP5_Bulgaria.pdf.

Mudde, C (2004) 'The populist zeitgeist' *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 542-563.

Mudde, C (2007) 'Populistkiat zeitgeist v dneshna Evropa' ['The populist zeitgeist in today's Europe'] *Critique and Humanism* 23(1): 115-119.

Otova, I (2014) 'European Cities, Mobility, New Citizenship: Sofia – A Possible "Open City"' PhD Thesis.

Otova, I. and Staykova, E (2019) 'National report on the governance of the asylum reception system in Bulgaria', CEASEVAL research on the Common European Asylum System, No. 17, accessed 29 October 2020 at: http://ceaseval.eu/publications/WP3_Bulgaria.pdf.

Republic of Bulgaria (2020) 'National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration 2015-2020', accessed 29 October 2020 (in Bulgarian) via: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/national-strategy-on-migration-asylum-and-integration-2015-2020.

Stanley, B (2008) 'The thin ideology of populism' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (1): 95-110.

Staykova, E (2013) 'Migration and citizenship' PhD Thesis.

Stoker, G and Hay, C. S (2017) 'Understanding and Challenging Populist Negativity towards Politics: The Perspectives of British Citizens' *Political Studies* 65(1): 4-23.

Vankova Z, V. Ilareva and D. Bechev (2017) 'Bulgaria, EU and the "refugee crisis"' accessed 29 October 2020 at: http://eupolicy.eu/blgariya-bezhanskata-kriza-nov-doklad-na-iep/.

Wilde, Pieter de (2011) 'No polity for old politics? A framework for analyzing the politicization of European integration' *Journal of European Integration* 33 (5), 559-575.

Wilde, Pieter de, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke (2016) 'Introduction: the differentiated politicization of European governance' *West European Politics*, 39 (1): 3-22.

Media sources cited in the text (in Bulgarian):

offnews 10.10.2013, 'BHK describes inhumane conditions for refugees and demands resignation' accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://offnews.bg/balgaria/bhk-opisa-nechoveshkite-uslovia-za-bezhantcite-i-poiska-ostavka-snimk-252426.html.

cross.bg 27.9.2016, 'Cornelia Ninova: Borisov's government invites refugees, promising to fix their lives' accessed 29 October 2020 at: http://www.cross.bg/ninova-obshtinite-bulgariya-1521112.html#.WISprFN97cs.

dnevnik.bg 10.12.2013 'Refugees and "Friends of Refugees" are Person of the Year', accessed 29 October 2020 at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/12/10/2199987_bejancite_i_priiateli_na_bejancite_sa_chovek_na/

Monitor 17.4.2014.

Capital Daily 30.4.2014.

Vesti 28.11.2016.

Flagman 18.9.2016.