

Lyubomir Kyuchukov

Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears But No Hatred

- The rates of illegal migration through Bulgaria are relatively low, the impact of refugee crisis on Bulgarian society at this stage being primarily in political and psychological terms, while the actual pressure, including that which is economic and social, remains relatively low in comparison with a number of other European states, especially those from South and South-East Europe.
- The conducted national representative opinion poll demonstrates that in Bulgaria the attitude towards refugees is ambivalent, being strongly susceptible to the influence of public messages. The Bulgarian society is charged with a number of fears with respect to the refugees but for the vast majority of the Bulgarian population (with the exception of 5%) these fears have not transformed into hatred against foreigners and are free from the ideological burden of xenophobia. The majority of the population believes that refugees represent a threat to the national security of Bulgaria by virtue of difficulties with integration, fear of foreign religion, ethnicity, and culture, but above all due to the concern that our state is in dire straits economically. The prevailing opinion is that the solution to the problem with refugees should be common for all countries within the EU.
- As an external border of the EU, Bulgaria holds an utmost interest in the adoption of a single all-European approach and search for a solidarity-based resolution of the problem.

April 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Context.....	2
Parameters of the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria.....	2
Public Attitudes towards Refugees in Bulgaria.....	4
Policies to Resolve the Problem – European Approaches and Bulgarian Measures	10
Major Conclusions	15

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES IN BULGARIA: FEARS, YET NO HATRED

The Context

The military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in the past few years generated an enormous refugee wave heading towards the Old Continent. The European Union faced not just an unexpected migration crisis but also the challenges ensuing from the absence of a single all-European philosophy and policy for a solution to the problem. On the other hand, the processes of globalization and the crisis of the national state compromised the integrity of the protective shell of the state and reinforced a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability among ordinary citizens, the latter seeking to retrieve the lost personal security at a lower, sub-state level, in the ethnic or religious community. Globalization took national social balances out of the comfort zone of the national state and flung them into global imbalances, exposing deep-reaching inequalities on a world-wide scale. The process turned social problems global too, making Africa's poverty and unemployment a problem for Europe. From this perspective the refugee crisis that Europe is meeting head-on is but the tip of the iceberg, a prelude to much more serious economic and social migration pressure that the continent is yet to face.

The current refugee crises came to question not only the vague migration policies but also freedom, equality, and tolerance as underlying principles of the political architecture of the EU. The lack of an all-European plan and consensus in addressing the refugee problem exacerbated political rhetoric among the member states of the European community. It gave rise to serious contradictions in approaches between the states of Western and Eastern Europe, between Germany and the Visegrad Four (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), between the Central-European states and Greece, etc. The

crisis has shaken the European Union and destabilized European societies.

The Paris terrorist attacks, robberies and sexual assaults in Cologne, the clashes with migrants at the Hungarian, Greek, and Macedonian borders, as well as the various instances of violence and aggression on the part of Islamists and migrants in different European cities and in refugee camps serve to further radicalize public attitudes in the EU member states and highlight the foibles of the doctrine of multiculturalism. And, last but not least, they fuel a rise in xenophobic sentiments among local communities in European states.

Europe faces a clash between its own values and understanding of humanity, reinforced in relevant international law (above all the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees), on one hand, and the fears of loss of identity and violation of those very values, on the other.

There is an increasingly perceptible rift between official political stands and feelings in society in a number of European cities. "Politically correct talk" as an end in itself, often skirting real problems, conditions radical negation of policies and actions of official authorities, and as a result public consciousness becomes propitious to generating fears of refugees and fuelling anxiety with possible negative consequences of the refugee crisis, including extreme right-wing, xenophobic ideas.

Parameters of the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria

Bulgaria, like practically all countries of South-Eastern Europe, is regarded by refugees exclusively as a transit corridor on their way to Central and Western Europe. Thus the country is off the main route of refugee migration – the Western Balkan route, from Greece to the Republic of Macedonia and Serbia to Central Europe. Several contributing factors can be identified as follows:

- The Western Balkan route is more direct, more resorted to – by refugees themselves and above all by the so called traffickers;
- The Republic of Macedonia and Serbia are not members of the EU, thus rendering coordination of single all-European approaches for regulating of receiving, especially at the initial stage, much harder and more inefficient;
- Bulgaria, and Romania too, are non-Schengen countries, which precludes proceeding from Greece to Western Europe without leaving the Schengen zone;
- Bulgaria treats illegal refugees in a more rigorous and restrictive way, which tends to discourage use of the route through this country because of perceived higher risk;
- The direct passage of illegal refugees from Turkey to Bulgaria is relatively low in numerical terms, due to the fact that this implies traversing the entire territory of Turkey and, in view of the circumstance that the thousands of Greek islands effectively defy any security, in contrast to the land Turkish-Bulgarian border, this makes the route through Greece preferable;
- In geopolitical terms the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey, as well as the priorities and interests of the USA of preserving the security in the region, further contribute to limiting the flow through Bulgaria and channeling it primarily through Greece instead.

All these circumstances have kept the rates of illegal migration through Bulgaria to relatively low values incomparable with the ones for the states along the main route across the Western Balkans. According to the official data of the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers, the number of asylum-seekers from foreign countries in the

past four years (since the beginning of the Syrian crisis) has marked a sharp increase: 1,387 persons in 2012, 7,144 in 2013, 11,081 in 2014, and 20,391 in 2015. Notwithstanding this, the rates are among the lowest for the countries with external borders of the EU to the south and south-east.

The data of the State Agency for Refugees serve also to ascertain the status of this country as a transit point for refugee flows. Out of the total number of foreign citizens who sought asylum in Bulgaria in 2013, 183 persons got refugee status, 2,279 – humanitarian status, and 354 persons were turned down. The numbers for 2014 are respectively 5,162, 1,838, and 500, and for 2015 – 4,708, 889, and 623. It should be noted that these values do not reflect the number of refugees who expressed a wish to permanently settle in this country, this number being 2, according to the Prime Minister. The latest data show that the occupancy rate of the accommodation facilities of the State Agency for Refugees is as low as 15%.

The distribution of refugees transiting Bulgaria by country of origin (data from the State Agency for Refugees for the first two months of 2016) features a prevailing share of refugees from Syria, followed by those from Afghanistan, Iraq, and stateless persons (persons fleeing war conflict areas without any documents, with stolen documents, or whose documents were destroyed by the holders personally). The shares of males and children for the same period are around 40% for each of these groups, women accounting for slightly more than 20%. In terms of education, more than 80% of these people have no education, or have elementary or secondary education, higher education graduates being around 5%.

According to a March 2016 report of the Ministry of Interior (Moi) analyzing the traffic solely of illegal migrants, in 2015 their

number was nearly 8,500, effectively all of them having attempted to transit Bulgaria and moving along the route from the Bulgarian-Turkish to the Bulgarian-Serbian border. In contrast with the data on foreign asylum-seekers in Bulgaria, as per the MoI the profile of illegal migrants is much more specific: they are primarily economic [migrants], predominantly from Iraq and Afghanistan, predominantly male (more than half of the total number), aged 18-34.

The MoI report focuses more heavily on the risks related to security in this country generated by the refugee flow. Firstly, the establishment of networks of traffickers and transforming the refugee crisis into a lucrative business are highlighted. In 2015 alone 411 traffickers were detained in Bulgaria (including citizens of other countries), but according to the MoI the legal penalties for this offence are too low, and fail to deter the phenomenon.

Against the background of the refugee crisis in Europe, data suggest that for the time being Bulgaria remains off the major refugee flows. The data of the International Organization for Migration provide a clear enough illustration of the place of Bulgaria vis-à-vis illegal migration routes, stating that in 2015 more than one million refugees entered Europe by sea and just 35,000 by land.

FRONTEX calculations are that in 2015 in excess of 1,800,000 migrants entered Europe. Half of them took the East Mediterranean route, and nearly 800,000 proceeded further via the Western Balkans. These estimates include both refugees and economic migrants entering Europe legally and illegally. Official EUROSTAT data indicate that 1,250,000 refugees sought asylum in Europe in 2015.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that the refugee crisis at this stage has primarily political and psychological ramifications with respect to the Bulgarian society, while the actual pressure, including that which is

economic and social, remains relatively low in comparison with a number of other European states, especially those from South and South-East Europe. Here, of course, the financial costs of prevention measures along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, of redeployment of considerable human resources primarily on the part of the MoI to the border, and of all the logistics for accommodation and stay of refugees incurred by the state over the past few years should not be ignored.

Public Attitudes towards Refugees in Bulgaria

Upon commissioning on the part of the Economics and International Relations Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Sova Harris polling agency carried out a representative national survey of public attitudes towards refugees.

The major goals of the survey included obtaining an objective picture of attitudes towards refugees in this country – both towards the problem at large and the attitude towards individual people. The key replies the survey sought to receive were related to the questions as to the extent to which fears of refugee wave transform into xenophobia; whether differences of religion or of ethnicity are more formative vis-à-vis a position on the issue; whether there are indeed real penchants for transferring of public attitudes towards refugees in the national perception of the different ethnicity or religion and for generating internal rifts along these lines in the Bulgarian society, similarly to the processes in Western Europe.

Another objective of the project was to analyze Bulgaria's policies related to the refugee problem, the measures undertaken by the Bulgarian authorities, and the impact of the all-European approaches and solutions on the risks for the national security of this country.

The survey covered 1,000 persons between February 20 and 28, 2016, and was representative for the adult population of Bulgaria. It does not capture possible changes in public attitudes after the agreement reached between the EU and Turkey in March, seeking to alleviate the refugee pressure, and respectively a factor that could reflect on the public perception in Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria the attitude towards refugees and the migration problem as a whole is ambivalent. According to the survey, **nearly 47% of people believe that the EU should not help refugees seeking asylum on its territory.** The most frequently quoted arguments are in terms of the following attitudes of the public:

- Alongside refugees, terrorists enter Europe;
- Bulgaria is a poor state and cannot provide budgets for refugees;
- Refugees are dangerous and pose a threat to national security;
- Refugees pose a threat to the EU economy;
- Refugees have no place in Europe and should seek asylum in the nearest peaceful country in their region instead;
- Refugees are people with another mentality and religion, and a large number of them cannot adopt the European values and model of behavior and cannot possibly integrate in the European community;
- The danger of the spread of Islamism in Europe rises.

Alternatively, **28% of Bulgarian adult citizens believe that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on the territory of Europe:**

- Nearly half of the people of this opinion believe that it is an act of humanity to help refugees because they are people in trouble seeking reprieve

from war: *“living human beings, having the same necessities and rights as ourselves”; “we have to help each other if we are human.”*

- Around one quarter of people who believe that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on the territory of the latter are of the opinion that there is still a need to restrict the Europe-bound migration wave – to provide assistance only to refugees of war in the Middle East, to mothers with children and elderly coming from Syria.

Data indicate **that the share of persons in favor of acceptance and providing of assistance to refugees in Europe, who at the same time believe that EU should engage in a rigorous migration policy, is substantial.**

The majority of the population of the country - 57% of the adult population - holds the opinion that the solution to the problem with refugees should be unified for all countries in the EU. This is the belief of 79% of people who favor the position that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on its territory and 54% of those who disapprove. The opposite opinion is shared by around 22% of people, holding that each EU member state should seek a solution separately.

The scale of the refugee wave rendered the quota system for distribution of refugees across the territory of the EU non-functional, the countries from Central and Eastern Europe even inclined to boycott the program. It is not by chance that the data of the present survey indicate a prevalence of skeptical attitudes towards Bulgaria's commitment to receive a given quota of refugees.

The preponderant part (nearly 54%) of adult residents of this country is not in favor of the state's acting in solidarity with the decision of the EU and accommodating the relevant refugee quota.

Close to 77% of people who have this opinion do not believe that the EU should provide asylum to refugees. Conversely, approximately 23% believe that the country should demonstrate solidarity in accepting the EU decision and receive the quota of refugees allocated to it. Two thirds of these are of the opinion that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on its territory.

The prevailing attitude is that strict control, new rules, and clear conditions for entering of migrants through EU outer borders are required. Nearly as many as 81% of adult citizens of the country agree with the assertion that a selection system should be established outside the borders of the EU for obtaining a clearance according to regulated procedures. Approximately 3% of adult Bulgarians side with the opinion that every refugee who seeks asylum on the territory of the EU should be accepted.

Around 78% of adult citizens of this country perceive refugees as a burden to the economy of the country. Around 3% of people believe that refugees could promote the development of our economy.

According to 60% of adult residents of the country refugees pose a threat to the national security of Bulgaria. The survey shows that this opinion is shared by:

- 64% of men, 56% of women;
- 63% of the elderly (61+), 63% of people aged 31-50, 59% of people aged 51-60, and 52% of the young (aged 18-30);
- 64% of people with secondary education, 56% of people with higher education, around half of the people with elementary education;
- 64% of Bulgarians, around 53% of Bulgarian Roma, one third of Bulgarian Muslims and 22% of Bulgarians with Turkish background;
- 69% of persons who state that they do not subscribe to any denomination,

nearly two thirds of persons identifying themselves as Christians, and around one fifth of Muslims;

- 70% of residents of regional centers, around 62% of urban residents, 60% of adult population of municipal villages, and 36% of the residents of the capital city;
- Two thirds (66%) of persons with left-wing political views, 62% of those describing themselves as being on the political right, and 61% of those identifying themselves as centrist. It is worth noting that the share of people with extreme right-wing views perceiving refugees as a national security threat is considerably higher, ranging from 72 to 75%.

Around 15% of adult citizens of the country are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Their opinion is that refugees are no threat to the national security. The following cohorts/groups concur with this:

- 17% of men and 14% of women;
- Around 13% of people aged 18-40, around 16% of people over 41;
- 22% of persons with higher education, 12% of people with secondary education, and 14% of people with elementary education;
- 38% of Bulgarians with Turkish background, one quarter of Bulgarian Muslims, 13% of Bulgarians and a negligible percentage of Bulgarian Roma;
- 39% of Muslims, 15% of atheists, 13% of Christians;
- 19% of the residents of the capital city, 16% of urban residents, 14% of residents of regional centers, 13% of the adult population of municipal villages.

The question "Do refugees pose a threat for you?", where more than one answer was possible, elicited results as follows:

- **47% of persons do not perceive refugees as a threat for them-**

- selves and state that they are not afraid of them.** Data demonstrate the following:
- 55% of people who do not perceive refugees as a threat are men and 45% are women;
 - 25% are older than 61, around 20% are aged 18-30 and a comparable share are aged between 31 and 40, 17% - between 41 and 50, and nearly as many are in the 51-60 age range;
 - 78% of those are Christians, 16% are Muslims, and 3% are atheists;
 - 33% of those are urban residents, 25% are village residents, 25% are residents of regional centers, 17% are residents of Sofia;
 - 29% of them subscribe to centrist political views, 24% to the right wing, and 17% to the left wing.
- **34% of adult citizens of this country perceive refugees as a threat for themselves and state that they are afraid of people of a different religion.** As a whole, Bulgaria has long-standing traditions of tolerance towards different religions. It can be presumed that **the reported attitudes reflect fear of Islamism, hostile towards European culture and values such as freedom and equality, and not of Islam as a religion.** The answers to this question demonstrate the following:
 - 52% of persons who perceive refugees as a threat to themselves and state that they are afraid of people with a different religion, are women and 48% are men;
 - 28% of them are elderly (over 61), 19% are young (18-30), 18% are aged between 31 and 40, 18% are in the 41-50 age span, and 17% are aged 51-60;
 - 94% of them are Christian, 3% do not subscribe to any religion, and 1% are Muslim;
 - 39% are residents of regional centers, 27% - of cities, 18% - of villages, and 17% are residents of the capital city;
 - 26% of them share left-wing political views, a similar share place themselves on the right side of the political spectrum, while the share of persons identifying themselves as centrist is 25%.
 - **Nearly 24% of persons state that they perceive refugees as a threat for themselves because they are afraid of people of another, different ethnicity:**
 - 59% of those are women and 41% are men;
 - 32% of those are elderly (over 61), 21% are 51-60, 17% are young (aged 31-40), 17% are aged 41-50, and 14% are in the 31-40 age group;
 - 95% are Christian, 4% are atheists, 1% are Muslim;
 - 27% of them are residents of regional centers, 27% are from cities, 24% from villages, and 22% are from the capital city.
 - 29% of them have right-wing political views, 26% - centrist, and those with leftist political views are 22%.
 - **Nearly 5% perceive refugees as a threat to themselves and report that they hate foreigners.**
 - 70% of people with xenophobic views are male, while those who are women are 30%;
 - 78% of them report that they are Christian, 15% Muslim, and around 4% atheist;
 - 39% of them reside in cities, one quarter – in the capital, one fifth –

in regional centers, and 17% are village residents;

- 28% of them are people who describe themselves as holding centrist political views, 20% with left-wing views, and 9% subscribe to right-wing political views.

Public attitudes towards the potential for integration of refugees into Bulgarian society are not straightforward. Adult Bulgarian citizens who believe that the most serious barrier to integration of refugees is not so much related to migrants, as to the economic and social situation in this country have a larger share. **Around 49% of people believe that our state is so weak that it cannot provide conditions for integration of refugees.** Conversely, **nearly 39% of adult Bulgarian citizens hold the view that the integration of refugees is impossible, primarily due to the different culture and religion, this precluding in principle their incorporation into our conditions.**

It is obvious that the skepticism as to the impossibility for integration of refugees stems from concerns that **our country's economy does not allow for providing of care for refugees**, rather than from fear of foreign religions, ethnicity, and culture, **the migration crisis threatening to further exacerbate social problems.**

The negative image of refugees in the public conscience is also largely perpetuated by the fear of the likelihood of penetration of Islamic extremists. As already reported, nearly 47% of adult Bulgarians believe that the EU should not help refugees seeking asylum on its territory. One of five believes that, **due to the refugee wave, terrorists penetrate Europe, thus aggravating the threat of terrorist attacks on the Old Continent.**

Data show that **for nearly 51% of the adult population of this country, having**

a refugee for a co-worker or neighbor is unacceptable. This opinion is shared by:

- 75% of persons who are not in favor of the EU helping refugees seeking asylum on its territory and 23% who are in favor of this;
- 71% of persons who believe that refugees pose a threat to the national security of the country;
- 61% of persons who believe that refugees have different culture and religion, and in principle cannot be integrated in our conditions;
- 48% of persons who believe that our state is weak and cannot provide for the integration of refugees;
- 53% of men, 48% of women;
- 53% of persons aged 41+ and 48% of persons aged 18-40;
- 46% of higher education graduates, 53% of people with secondary education or lower;
- 57% of residents of municipal villages, 56% of residents of regional centers, 51% of urban residents, 32% of the adult population of Sofia;
- 59% of Roma, 53% of Bulgarians, 32% of Bulgarians with Turkish background, 21% of Bulgarian Muslims;
- 54% of persons stating that they are of Christian denomination, 54% of atheists, 27% of Muslims.

Nearly 23% report that they do not mind having a refugee for a co-worker or neighbor. Data indicate that the breakdown of those who concur with this opinion is as follows:

- 53% of persons who believe that the EU should help refugees seeking asylum on its territory;
- 59% of people who do not perceive refugees as a threat to national security of Bulgaria;
- 22% of persons who believe that refugees have different culture and reli-

gion and in principle cannot be integrated in our conditions;

- 25% of persons of the opinion that our state is weak and cannot provide for the integration of refugees;
- 24% of men, 22% of women;
- 25% of persons aged 41-60, 23% of persons aged 18-40, 19% of the elderly (60+);
- 33% of persons with higher education, 19% of persons with secondary education, 14% of persons with elementary education;
- 31% of the residents of the capital, 25% of residents of regional centers, 22% of urban residents, and 14% of residents of municipal villages;
- 38% of Bulgarian Muslims, 23% of Bulgarians with Turkish background, 22% of Bulgarians, and 12% of Bulgarian Roma;
- 30% of persons of Muslim denomination, around a quarter of atheists, 21% of Christian Orthodox.

The survey demonstrates that a serious inconsistency and disorientation of opinion of the public exists in this country, easily swayed with conflicting public information and interpretations. The major conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the conducted opinion poll on the attitudes of the Bulgarian population towards refugees are as follows:

- *In Bulgaria the attitude towards refugees and the migration problem as a whole, is not straightforward. Nearly 47% of adult Bulgarian citizens are against the EU helping refugees seeking asylum on its territory. 28% of people side with the opposite opinion.*
- *According to 60% of adult residents of this country, refugees are a threat to the national security of Bulgaria. Around 15% think the opposite.*

- *57% of adult population believe that the solution to the refugee problem should be a unified one for all EU member states.*
- *Skepticism prevails as to the commitment of Bulgaria to accept a fixed refugee quota. Nearly 54% of adult residents of this country do not agree that the state should uphold the EU decision on the basis of solidarity and accept the relevant refugee quota.*
- *The preponderant attitude is that strict control, new rules and clear-cut conditions for entry of migrants through the external EU borders are required. Nearly 81% of adult citizens of this country agree with the statement that a selection system should be established outside the borders of the EU for obtaining clearance according to regulated procedures.*
- *Skepticism as to the impossibility of integration of refugees is attributed not solely to the fear of foreign religion, ethnicity, and culture, but also to concerns that the economic state of the country is not conducive to care for refugees, the migration crisis being likely to further exacerbate social problems. Around 49% of people believe that the state is too weak to provide for the integration of refugees. Conversely, approximately 39% of adult Bulgarian citizens believe integration is impossible, primarily because they have different culture and religion and by definition cannot possibly integrate in our conditions.*
- *Around half of adult Bulgarian citizens (47%) report that they do not perceive refugees as a threat and do not fear them. At the same time the share of people for whom the image of refugees is negative is substantial. One in three adult Bulgarian citizens perceives refugees as a threat out of*

fear of people with different religion; one in four – out of fear of people of another ethnicity, one of twenty – out of dislike of foreigners.

- *Political affiliation effectively fails to influence substantially the attitude towards refugees, the rates for most of the replies of persons identifying themselves as either left or right-wing, extreme left and extreme right-wing respectively, being comparable.*
- *The attitude towards a different religion generates more fears than that towards different ethnicity – stemming rather from the radical Islam ideology.*
- *The feelings among the public captured in the period of the survey identify the fears of refugees dictated by:*
 - *Diminished border control inconsistent with the scale of the migration influx as well as suspicions that along with refugees, radical Islamists and terrorist can also enter Europe;*
 - *Concerns that the Bulgarian state is poor and cannot provide for integration of refugees;*
 - *Worries that refugees are fundamentally different from us in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture, and value system and cannot integrate in our society.*

The ultimate summarized conclusion from the survey may be formulated as follows: Bulgarian society is charged with a number of fears towards refugees, yet for the vast majority of the Bulgarian population (with the exception of 5%) these fears have not translated into hatred for foreigners and are free from the burden of xenophobia.

Policies to Resolve the Problem – European Approaches and Bulgarian Measures

By virtue of being an external EU border, Bulgaria is tremendously interested in the adoption of a unified all-European approach and the identification of a solidarity-based solution to the problem. Relegating this all-European approach to the national level would result in an excessive burden for the countries of South and above all of South-East Europe which are immediate neighbors of ultimate sources of the refugee crisis – the conflict in the Middle East and the Syrian Crisis.

Over the years Europe has developed and avails of a set of tools extensive enough (the Schengen Agreement, the Dublin Protocol, readmission agreements with neighbor countries, including with Turkey – one that still has not become effective but nevertheless of key importance for addressing the current crisis), which seemed good enough for the regulation of migration processes – until a year ago. The recent developments, however, have exposed a major deficit – the absence of an all-European policy conditioning a coherent implementation of available mechanisms. Facing the dilemma of accepting refugees or closing borders for them and attempting to strike the necessary balance between fundamental humanitarian principles of international law and preserving domestic stability and national security of EU member states, the EU for a long time has lapsed into *Zugzwang*, failing to find a useful move. On one hand, European traditions and values, international legislation on refugees, and the objective processes of globalization (rendering national borders an easily negotiated barrier for transfer of information, free communication and movement of capital and goods and promoting human mobility) ruled out a simple ban or termination of migration processes. On the other hand, obviously no

single national budget or social system could sustain the pressure of millions of migrants.

All the measures undertaken from the summer of 2015 until early 2016 (strengthening of marine anti-immigration operations of FRONTEX in the Mediterranean Sea, the confiscation of nautical vessels and prosecution of human traffickers, even the mobilization of army forces and construction of protective walls along borders) seemed logical enough at first glance, yet had two major weaknesses: first, some of them were simply non-implementable (the introduction of the much disputed migrant quotas for individual EU member states); second, and also more important, they addressed the consequence, not the cause of the problem. As a result the EU saw centrifugal trends pick up (at state level) and internal rifts intensify – between extreme right-wing xenophobia and ghettoization (at society level); there was no single philosophy as to the approach to resolving the problem and coordination in the effectuation of specific measures, whereas the principle of solidarity became void of practical relevance.

At the same time the specifics of the problems Western Europe faces, on one hand, and the Balkans (Bulgaria included) on the other hand, should be taken into account. While the end-destination countries handle the long-term challenge of receiving, accommodating and, above all, subsequently integrating refugees, Balkan countries are forced to grapple with the immediate problems of transit, respectively prevention of entry of migrants on their territory. From this perspective, the pressure of the refugee wave on state administrations on the Balkans was much more direct (especially along the Western Balkan route), while in Western Europe it reflected intensely on societies. Therefore, as the survey comes to prove, in Bulgaria, and this largely is valid for other Balkan states too, latent fears are

associated more with international terrorism, the import of radical ideas from the outside and into the moderate Muslim communities, the establishment and activation of Islamist terrorists cells in the region, and less so with concerns that refugees may come here to stay. Last but not least, they are connected with the emergence of a “residual effect” of a sort: intensification of organized crime and corruption as during the period of war and embargo in former Yugoslavia. In other words, while Western Europe faces fears within (in terms of the foreigners that are already there, including those that have been there for decades), in the Balkans the threat is associated with those from without (migrants who are still striving to enter). This conditions both a certain consolidation of societies, as well as the strengthening of nationalisms on the Balkans – which, in turn, heightens the risk of secondary splitting of these very societies along ethnic and religious lines.

The reproduction of the two approaches to address the refugee crisis in Europe – approaches that are radically opposite in terms of logic, but identical in terms of objective - risks the propagation of new divides within Europe. For, paradoxical as it may seem, ultimately both the facilitation of internal border-to-border transit of refugees, characterizing the approach of Greece, and for a long time of other countries along the Western Balkan route on one hand, and, on the other hand, the construction of walls to forestall entry of refugees into a country’s own territory, championed by Hungary first but subsequently adopted by other countries, have coinciding goals: passing on the problem to the neighbor – the one before or the one after us along the chain. This had several quite negative ramifications for the EU in the medium term:

- Walls were put in place and internal dividing lines within the EU itself, between member states, emerged;

- The very fundamental European principles were put to test;
- The Schengen system found itself under enormous pressure resulting in temporary resumption of border checks by a number of countries;
- The trends of having a Europe of different configurations and tiers grew stronger, in the end intensifying the risk of a long-term division between center and periphery;
- The debate of the future of Europe – towards deepening of integration or re-vesting national capitals with some policies – was compromised and immensely distorted by the political state of affairs – which would further impact the efficiency of decisions taken on specific issues.

The refugee crisis substantially modified the relation between the EU and Balkan candidate member states. Without being part of the EU, Balkan countries (in the first place Macedonia and Serbia) were effectively burdened with tasks typical for outer borders of the EU. This sharply increased the pressure on them, both international and domestic, charging them with responsibilities in the absence of matching resources - responsibilities no state could possibly assume alone. Building walls brought the region to a risk of a double isolation of a kind – from Europe and internally among the Balkan countries.

The general attitudes in the Bulgarian society are projected on to the attitude towards the policy of the government in connection with the refugee crisis – with the relevant amount of criticism typical of assessing actions of the governments of countries in general. As a whole, public statements of institutions are quite ridden with discrepancy, often not consistent enough, creating an impression that there is no fairly clear vision of the possibilities for a long-term solution to the

problem. Incidentally, against a background of a lacking unified and coordinated position of the EU on the issue, the inefficiency of proposed measures and approaches of Brussels, and the controversial signals of European capitals, the Bulgarian position quite harmoniously fits in with the general disharmony reigning in Europe.

Despite the ambivalent and often contradictory verbalization of the political position on the part of state and governmental institutions, however, in practical terms Bulgaria adhered to a line of action vis-à-vis the refugee crisis that has been steady and pragmatic enough.

Notwithstanding the numerous attempts to exploit the refugee crisis as an instrument for domestic policy ends, several consecutive Bulgarian governments after 2013 maintained in effect a unified philosophy (although never formulated clearly and explicitly enough) with respect to one of the most complicated and controversial elements of the measures to tackle the crisis. The construction of a protective wall on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, which was initially met with serious disapproval in Europe, gradually turned into a unified approach to regulate the refugee crisis. An important element warrants noting: Bulgaria was among the first to construct such facilities along the outer EU borders, without even being a Schengen member, but refused to do so along the intra-EU borders, i.e. along the Bulgarian-Greek border, despite the internal political and public pressure that sometimes could be quite strong. This was consistent with the declared general approach for seeking all-European solutions versus an option where each country fends for itself.

From this perspective Bulgaria had no grounds or interest whatsoever to support the approach of the Visegrad Four and Austria for the so-called "Plan B." It provided for the construction of an anti-refugee bulwark of a sort

along the northern borders of Greece with Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. This plan entailed an extra burden for both countries, thereby effectively “moving” the outer borders of the EU and of the Schengen area, tasking these states with the security thereof, without delegating the relevant rights (the Republic of Macedonia is not a member of the EU, while Bulgaria has still not acceded to Schengen, despite having fulfilled the technical criteria) and without the relevant financial resources required.

The agreement between the EU and Turkey reached in March 2016 leaves the impression of the first consistent attempt on the part of Brussels to work out a more comprehensive vision for resolving the refugee crisis – regardless of the serious criticism in connection with the humanitarian aspects by a number of human rights organizations, including the International Refugee Organization and in political terms alike, primarily due to the fact of a conclusion of an agreement with a state that drifts increasingly away from democratic values and slides towards authoritarian rule. Several key elements need highlighting:

- *The context:* The agreement was signed after the first real ceasefire arrangement since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict following the cessation of hostilities arrived at under the pressure of the US and Russia. This marked an important step towards resolving the refugee crisis on the very grounds of its origin, i.e. an attempt to deal with the reasons and not with the consequences.
- *The approach:* Despite the serious disagreements on the part of a number of EU countries, after more than a year of unsuccessful attempts to coordinate solutions that are all-European by nature, the EU eventually witnessed the consolidation of the idea of implementing an inclusive (supported pri-

marily by Germany) rather than an excluding (implemented by the Visegrad states and Austria) approach vis-à-vis Greece – with all the ensuing obligations for Greece itself, but with the agreed assistance on the part of the EU for the state.

- *The partner:* With more than 2,500,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey and the growth of their transfer to the Greek islands into a lucrative business, checking of the refugee flow to Europe without the serious commitment on the part of Turkey is practically impossible.
- *The people:* In contrast to building walls or merely closing down the “Western Balkan route” thus failing to address the fate of the several tens of thousands of refugees and migrants that are already on Greek territory, the agreement for the first time attempts to put in place a mechanism that would provide some kind of a way out. The agreement for re-admission of refugees into Turkey, in return for which Europe is ready to accept the relevant number in EU member states, provides conditions for relieving the pressure on Greece.
- *The regulation:* The agreement between the EU and Turkey attempts to place the refugee crisis in the field of law, i.e. to check illegal migration and allow entry into Europe only of actual refugees registered earlier on Turkish territory.

Although this agreement strives to answer a number of key questions for tackling the crisis, its practical implementation will run into a multitude of problems. First comes the continuing disagreement of a number of countries with individual elements thereof. Hungary questions the very approach for receiving new refugees in Europe. Other countries stood against some of the commitments

of the EU vis-à-vis Turkey – not so much the financial ones, as the agreed removal of visa requirements for Turkish citizens for traveling in the EU (although agreed back in 2013 and conditioned by the fulfillment of many provisions) and speeding up of negotiations for Turkey's EU membership. There is a plethora of question marks as to the number of refugees Europe could possibly be ready to accept, and as to the countries that might be willing to sustain such an approach on a long-term basis – following the transfer of the expected number. Above all – Europe sees rising concerns that the EU has made yet another compromise with its values for the sake of the stability of Turkey and has demoted itself to dependency upon it. This dependency may be manifested by the subsequent muffling of criticism against undemocratic and authoritarian practices as well as closing of eyes with respect to possible Turkish military operations against the Kurds in Northern Syria – which could destroy the cessation of hostilities achieved there.

From the standpoint of Bulgaria, this agreement is an opportunity to prevent one of the major risks for national security which can be triggered by the refugee crisis. It is in terms of a possible rechanneling of refugee flows to the Greek-Bulgarian border, should the forceful closing down of the Western Balkan route materialize without providing an alternative to the refugees that are already on Greek territory. The agreed transportation of registered refugees from Turkey to end-destination countries in the EU by air also would help alleviate the potential pressure on the land borders of this country.

On the other hand it would be quite optimistic to expect that the agreement would quickly and definitively solve the question without generating some, albeit limited, realignment of routes. What Bulgaria failed to achieve, or did not attempt to achieve

altogether, in the framework of the agreement, was to negotiate a status similar to that granted to Greece. In other words: a possibility for returning illegal refugees back to Turkey and providing the required material and financial European resources for the country if necessary.

Outside the specific measures for handling the refugee flow, the crisis brings Bulgaria to face several more long-term and fundamental questions related to the quality of the country's membership in the EU. In practical terms, first is the issue of Schengen membership. Regardless of the serious problems and disruptions that, according to many, question even the future existence of a single Schengen area, Bulgaria cannot afford to strike the insistence on joining the system from its agenda. Of course, there is some risk in terms of redirection of a part of the flow of refugees and, subsequently, the serious flow of migrants to Bulgaria, should Bulgaria and Romania join Schengen, by virtue of which entering Bulgarian territory would mean entering the single Schengen area. From this standpoint, at the current stage the situation where the country goes for a phased accession to Schengen, starting from its airspace and international airports on Bulgarian territory, would seem a more acceptable option. Such an approach has been publicly debated and also informally proposed by Brussels on more than one occasion.

The other major, even highly strategic issue relevant to the place of Bulgaria in the EU on a far more distant horizon is that the country should not allow its peripheral position in the EU to be institutionalized. The crisis exposed many a contradiction and unresolved matter within the European Union itself. It caused new dividing lines not only between "the old" and "the new" Europe – most salient in the stands of Germany and the Visegrad Group; it spurred strong centrifugal

trends at all levels of the European structure. Concerns of possible voting in favor of leaving the EU at the upcoming referendum in the United Kingdom heightened, much amplified by the expected response to the series of suicide and terrorist attacks in France and Belgium. Separatist trends are picking up across the more affluent regions in a number of member states (Catalonia, the Flemish Region, Northern Italy, and Scotland too, for that matter – relying on its domestic power resources), with refusals to pay the price of the crisis. And then there is the most serious problem for Europe today – the aggravation of internal rifts in European societies causing deep wounds and lasting divides. The effective versus a merely declarative safeguarding of one of the fundamental principles of the EU, the principle of solidarity, which is key for countries like Bulgaria, is under severe threat. Against this backdrop a sharp intensification of the desire of a number of member states for a European Union of different tiers and configurations, for institutionalization of various formats and constitution of new force fields within the EU (around the Eurozone, Schengen, etc.) is at work. With such developments, Bulgaria, still in a disadvantaged position in the EU by virtue of the ongoing monitoring mechanism anyhow, runs the risk of getting into a highly adverse situation of a periphery state burdened with serious responsibilities for the security and stability of the EU, as an external border thereof, yet constrained in terms of instruments and resources to fully deliver.

Major Conclusions

The current refugee crisis questioned freedom, equality, and tolerance as fundamental principles embedded in the political architecture of the EU.

Europe faces the clash between its own values and understanding of humanity and

the fears of loss of identity and violation of these very values.

The rates of illegal migration through Bulgaria are relatively low, the impact of refugee crisis on Bulgarian society at this stage being primarily in political and psychological terms, while the actual pressure, including that which is economic and social, remains relatively low in comparison with a number of other European states, especially those from South and South-East Europe.

The conducted national representative opinion poll demonstrates that in Bulgaria the attitude towards refugees is ambivalent, being strongly susceptible to the influence of public messages.

The most important summarized conclusion is that the Bulgarian society is charged with a number of fears with respect to the refugees but for the vast majority of the Bulgarian population (with the exception of 5%) these fears have not transformed into hatred against foreigners and are free from the ideological burden of xenophobia.

The majority of the population believes that refugees represent a threat to the national security of Bulgaria by virtue of difficulties with integration, fear of foreign religion, ethnicity, and culture, but above all due to the concern that our state is in dire straits economically.

The prevailing opinion is that the solution to the problem with refugees should be common for all countries within the EU.

As an external border of the EU, Bulgaria holds an utmost interest in the adoption of a single all-European approach and search for a solidarity-based resolution of the problem.

Notwithstanding the ambivalent and often contradictory verbalization of the political stance of the country, in practical terms Bulgaria has adhered to a sufficiently consistent

and pragmatic line of action vis-à-vis the refugee crisis.

Bulgaria has no grounds for or interest in supporting the approach of the Visegrad Four countries and Austria for the so-called Plan B, providing for the construction of a protective anti-refugee wall along the northern borders of Greece with Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia.

The agreement between the EU and Turkey reached in March 2016 marks the first consistent attempt on the part of Brussels to

work out a more comprehensive vision to resolve the refugee crisis.

Bulgaria cannot afford to strike off its agenda the insistence on joining the Schengen system. At this stage a more acceptable option seems a step-by-step inclusion, starting from the airspace and international airports on the territory of Bulgaria.

Bulgaria should not allow the refugee crisis to lead to institutionalization of its peripheral status in the Union.

About the author:

Lyubomir Kyuchukov Director of the Economics and International Relations Institute

**Imprint**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St.
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria
Responsible:
Regine Schubert, Director

Orders

e-mail: office@fes.bg

All texts are available online

www.fes.bg

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.