



Where is my home?

Homelessness and Access to Housing among
Asylum-Seekers, Refugees and Persons with
International Protection in **BULGARIA**

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Acronyms

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BAS	Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
BHC	Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
BP	Border Police
BRC	Bulgarian Red Cross
CoM	Council of Ministers
DPD	District Police Department
ERF	European Refugee Fund
EU	European Union
HTAA	Home for Temporary Accommodation of Adults
IC Sofia	Integration Centre of SAR, city of Sofia
IRSAA	Implementing Regulations of the Social Assistance Act
LAR	Law for Asylum and Refugees
LFRB	Law for Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria
MI	Ministry of Interior
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHIF	National Health Insurance Fund
NPIR	National Programme for Integration of Refugees
OEMB	Occupational Expert Medical Board
PDPA	Personal Data Protection Act
RRC Banya	Registration and Reception Centre – village of Banya
RRC Sofia	Registration and Reception Centre – city of Sofia
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
SAA	Social Assistance Act
SAD	Social Assistance Directorate
SAR	State Agency for Refugees
SCTAF	Special Centre for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Summary of key results.....	5
Recommendations	7
1. Introduction and methodology	9
1.1. Subject, objectives and tasks of the research	9
1.2. Background information.....	10
1.2.1. Legislative framework	10
1.2.2. Statistical data on refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria	14
1.3. Methodology of field work	16
1.3.1. Sample	16
1.3.2. Method of registration and fieldwork tools	19
2. Research results.....	21
2.1. Migration models.....	21
2.2. Asylum application procedure.....	22
2.3. Housing and homelessness.....	22
2.3.1. The formal model of accommodation of asylum-seekers	22
2.3.2 Other forms of housing	25
2.3.3. Homelessness – lack of initial stage of integration	29
2.4. Subsistence and social assistance.....	31
2.4.1. Subsistence means.....	31
2.4.2. Social support	32
2.5. Integration policies.....	34
3. Terminology.....	35
4. References	36
5. Annex: Questionnaire for an interview with an asylum-seeker / refugee.....	38

Summary of key results

The research data points to the conclusions that:

- **Asylum-seekers, refugees and humanitarian status holders are all faced with the risk of homelessness;**
- **They are vulnerable at both the beginning and the end of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure;**
- **The detention of asylum-seekers in Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAF) is a factor determining the life course of many interviewees and is one of the major factors that contributes to homelessness at the beginning of the RSD procedure.** Due to the sometimes prolonged detention in SCTAF, some asylum-seekers declare that they have accommodation and provide a **fictitious external address. They do so in order to be released from detention, which directly results either in homelessness or in dire living conditions below the poverty line.**
- **Asylum-seekers who are released from SCTAF to an external address become entrapped in a vicious circle** as they are not entitled to accommodation in a Registration and Reception Centre (RRC) of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), nor can they receive financial support and Bulgarian language courses. The research data reveals that detention in SCTAF predetermines to a large extent the subsequent fate of asylum-seekers and influences the decisions they make about staying in Bulgaria and integrating.
- Asylum-seekers accommodated in RRCs have temporary shelter and are **at risk of homelessness at the conclusion of the RSD procedure.** When SAR grants status to an asylum-seeker, he/she **has to leave the RRC within an extremely short period (14 days)**, and in cases of subsequent applications, he/she loses the entitlement both to accommodation at the RRC and to State financial assistance.

- **The risk of homelessness amongst those granted protection is also a result of integration measures that are insufficient in their scope and duration.** The six-month language training course, the limited choice of vocational training courses and the lack of targeted housing policy are some of the key factors for unemployment amongst refugees, resulting in a lack of appropriate accommodation and homelessness. This situation is exacerbated by the ongoing financial and economic crisis.

In the course of the first few years after receiving protection, refugees tend to take up low paying jobs in order to ensure minimum income. If they have higher education and specific professional qualifications, those can be utilized for suitable employment only at a later stage. Finding a job, however, is to a great extent dependent upon Bulgarian language competence, which is a must for being involved in the working environment. **Hence, linguistic competence is a key prerequisite for finding a job and securing good housing conditions.** Of course, while linguistic competence is not in itself a guarantee for success, it is the first and foremost precondition for employment.

Unlike the asylum-seekers accommodated in the RRC Sofia, those in the RRC Banya **can access language and vocational training courses only after being granted protection**, as access to the National Programme for Integration of Refugees (NPIR) requires moving to the city of Sofia.¹ Moving to Sofia requires paying for transport, finding accommodation and settling in another city, which is difficult for refugees, with their limited resources, and thereby increasing the risk of homelessness. Refugees who had been accommodated at the RRC Banya have less time for learning the Bulgarian language or acquiring vocational skills. They get an unequal start after leaving the RRC, in particular with respect to finding a job and accommodation, both of which require Bulgarian language competence.

¹ Bulgarian language training courses at the RRC Banya were held till the summer of 2011. They are scheduled to be resumed in the summer of 2012.

The lack of state or municipal policy for tackling homelessness among asylum-seekers and refugees adds to their vulnerability. The municipal crisis centres place barriers to access to destitute foreigners who do not have protection status, by requiring a criminal record certificate and identification. Municipalities create regulatory obstacles for any foreigner to access municipal housing, while the lack of housing policy with regard to refugees after they leave SAR facilities makes them vulnerable to fraud and unfair treatment from landlords. Under these circumstances, asylum-seekers and protection status holders rely mainly on the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and church organisations.

The RRC facilities can be described as being worn out, partially renovated and not in line with European Union (EU) standards, as repeatedly observed by UNHCR.²

The quality of accommodation of asylum-seekers and protection status holders after leaving the RRC is directly dependent on their employment and income. Their family status is yet another key factor in terms of housing and prevention of homelessness. According to the research data, refugee families, in particular those with young children, receive more positive attitude from landlords. No cases have been recorded of families being forced to leave the RRCs without having been provided with accommodation or at least with funds to rent lodgings.

Asylum-seekers perceive the procedure for applying for protection in Bulgaria as unclear and non-transparent. All the interviewees complained about the excessively long duration of the procedure. Data from SAR shows that the majority of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria are denied refugee status, which in most cases results in an appeal against SAR's decision. During that time, they experience extreme marginalization and social exclusion as they have minimal chances of finding a job legally, have no permanent income and housing and live below the poverty line.



Asylum-seekers look for their homeless friends who are living in an abandoned building situated near a refugee reception and integration centre in Sofia, Bulgaria.
© UNHCR/B. Szandelszky/2010

² "Being a Refugee", UNHCR Annual Reports.

Recommendations

Regarding access to the Refugee Status Determination procedure:

- 1 The General Directorate of the Border Police (BP) with the Ministry of Interior (MoI) should allocate funds from their budget for translation services for rare languages through full-time or part-time interpreters as a minimum standard for border control of asylum-seekers and for the purposes of communication and registration of applications for international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria.³
- 2 A “tolerance status” should be introduced with respect to asylum-seekers who, while having been repeatedly refused status, have resided on the territory of Bulgaria for many years as they have been unable to return to the country of origin where their lives will be at risk.⁴ Such status should be introduced by means of a regulation in the Law on Aliens in the Republic of Bulgaria and should be conditional on a number of additional requirements.

Regarding access to housing:

- 1 SAR should not be considered the only institution in charge of accommodation and integration of asylum-seekers and refugees.
- 2 Bulgarian municipalities should be involved in the policies and measures aimed at refugees’ integration in the country.⁵
- 3 An assessment should be made, by means of discussions with the local authorities, of the possible introduction of a mechanism whereby the municipality on whose territory the refugee has chosen to settle receives the funding for integration activities. Thus, the local authorities will have both an incentive and the funding for solving the problems of this group of individuals.
- 4 The ordinances on municipal housing should be amended to abolish any discriminatory provisions that impede access to accommodation for beneficiaries of international protection.

- 5 Funds for housing of refugees in Bulgaria should be reallocated from the multi-annual and annual programmes that are being delivered with funding from the European Refugee Fund (ERF). These funds should be used to renovate suitable existing accommodation facilities and to create options for alternative forms of accommodation. Housing of refugees should be included in the priorities of the new European Migration and Asylum Fund, which is to become operational in 2014.
- 6 SAR, in cooperation with UNHCR and NGOs, should investigate the opportunities for providing accommodation for homeless asylum-seekers, refugees and humanitarian status holders. Based on the findings, clear-cut operational arrangements for such cases should be put in place. One of the options for temporary shelter is at the municipal centres for temporary accommodation.⁶
- 7 SAR should increase the period for those with newly granted status to leave the RRC premises from 14 days to one month.
- 8 SAR should increase the length of the period for receiving monthly financial assistance for rent and utilities provided under the NPIR, from six months to one year, as had previously been the practice until the autumn of 2011.⁷

³ As repeatedly recommended by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC). See, for example, the BHC 2010 Annual Border Monitoring Report.

⁴ As also recommended in the Civil Monitoring of the Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners with the MI, January-June 2011. Sofia: Open Society Institute. Available at: <http://goo.gl/KT92u>

⁵ As recommended at the meeting on the development of a strategy for integration of refugees, 13-14 May 2010 in Pravets; working group on housing of refugees: facilitator: Kina Sabeva; rapporteur: Alex Ongiro.

⁶ In the winter of 2011 SAR, by applying a similar approach, assisted several homeless refugees.

⁷ In the autumn of 2011 SAR changed its internal rules for implementation of the NPIR, decreasing the period for monthly financial assistance for housing and utilities to persons included in the programme from one year to six months.

- 9 The NPIR should be available outside Sofia. In the meantime, targeted financial aid for moving from the RRC in Banya to Sofia should be provided to refugees who want to enroll in the NPIR.
- 10 SAR should provide information on the legal aspects of renting accommodation and tenants' and landlords' rights and obligations. SAR could act as a guarantor to private landlords, at least in the cases of individuals who have been granted protection, or given commitment on their part towards SAR.

Regarding integration:

- 1 The period during which asylum-seekers are not entitled to employment should be reduced. This will facilitate the integration process at all levels – learning Bulgarian, earning an income, establishing social contacts and finding accommodation.

✓ **Commitment made by SAR:** SAR is preparing amendments to the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR) aimed at reducing the period during which asylum-seekers are not entitled to employment.⁸
- 2 Based on discussions with local authorities, an assessment should be made of the options for Bulgarian language courses to be delivered at the local level with municipalities' agreement and mediation.
- 3 An audit of the skills and professional qualifications of refugee and humanitarian status holders⁹ should be conducted in order to avoid their under-employment in jobs at a lower level than their qualifications and skills.
- 4 Opportunities should be provided for asylum-seekers to be involved in activities organised by SAR on SAR's premises with remuneration provided by SAR's budget. For example, this can include maintenance of the RRC such as painting, renovation and cleaning.
- 5 With the assistance of the Employment Agency and the National Chamber of Crafts, refugees should be provided opportunities for training courses in entrepreneurship and setting up a business.¹⁰ Those granted status should be informed about micro-crediting opportunities.

- ✓ **Commitment made by SAR:** As a result of an Agreement for Cooperation and Partnership Activities signed between SAR and the Employment Agency on 22 December 2011, the purpose of which was to improve the access of refugees to employment and career development, the first job fair for refugees was held on 27 September 2012. It should be replicated.
- 6 Training for municipalities and local level stakeholders should be introduced to raise their awareness of aspects to the integration of asylum-seekers and refugees.

✓ **Commitment made by SAR:** Such training courses are included in the 2011 and 2012 Annual Programmes of SAR under the ERF.
- 7 The scope of SAR's integration programme should be broadened to include the RRC Banya.

✓ **Commitment made by SAR:** SAR's priorities for 2012 include making the NPIR available outside Sofia in 2012, with financial support from the ERF. Regarding the Bulgarian language courses at the RRC Banya, SAR, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, is exploring the opportunities for training at the local level.
- 8 Asylum-seekers should be provided with opportunities to learn Bulgarian by setting up additional language classes instead of the current practice of including them in the classes with the refugees, and only if there is capacity.

⁸ The commitments were presented to the research team and UNHCR's Integration Associate during a preliminary meeting on the report findings in April 2012 as part of the feed back of SAR. They were additionally endorsed at a meeting with the management of SAR in July 2012.

⁹ This good practice is widely spread in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. It makes an assessment of refugees' skills and qualifications by means of in-depth interviews. More information can be found at: <http://goo.gl/PUh3C> and at: <http://goo.gl/G9kYS>.

¹⁰ This can be implemented in a way similar to the pilot project of the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) "Business Incubator for Vulnerable Groups" whose objective is to enable representatives of vulnerable groups, including refugees, to develop strategies for an independent life, which can help them get involved in the labour market on their own. Consultations are held on starting a business and micro-crediting. More information can be found at: <http://goo.gl/Y2Z2n>.

1. Introduction and methodology

Given the focus of the research, the terms “foreigner seeking protection” and “foreigner granted humanitarian or refugee status” will primarily be used.

Homelessness in this report is defined as not being able to secure shelter that fulfils minimal conditions allowing it to be deemed inhabitable living space. The term “**at risk of homelessness**” refers to persons seeking or granted international protection who find themselves in circumstances that would almost certainly lead to a situation of homelessness.

1.1. Subject, objectives and tasks of the research

The objective of this research is to collect data on housing and homelessness among individuals granted international protection, persons applying for protection for the first time and awaiting a decision on their application, as well as persons who have been refused protection but are appealing the decision and are in Bulgaria on those grounds.

The subject of the research, according to the terms of reference, includes:

- Access to housing – availability of adequate housing at affordable prices, location of housing, relationship with landlords and practices in the real estate market;
- Type of housing – State or municipal, rented privately from a landlord or owned by the refugee;
- Existence of a contract when renting – whether a contract is offered or housing is rented on the black market. If rented with a contract – whether the real rental rate is shown on the contract or part of it remains in the grey sector;

- Living conditions – access to electricity, running hot and cold water, availability of a bathroom, sewer service and household items;
- Personal experience of short-term or continuous homelessness after being granted protection (including access to shelter and temporary housing);
- Access to targeted housing aid (such as housing or financial assistance for rent);
- Demographic profile of accommodated and homeless individuals – ethnicity, age, gender, family status and special needs.

Tasks of the research:

- Identify the key stakeholders to serve as institutional referents of the project;
- Identify a target group and select respondents on the basis of the maximum spectrum of demographic characteristics: nationality, gender, age, legal status, families and individuals with special needs;
- Conduct individual and group interviews with due regard to the age, gender, religious, ethnic and health sensitivity of the issues for the interviewees;
- Review existing legislation;
- Analyse collected data and formulate recommendations.

1.2. Background information

1.2.1. Legislative framework

*The Law for Asylum and Refugees (LAR)*¹¹ regulates the RSD procedure in Bulgaria, and the rights and obligations of foreigners who are seeking, and those who have been granted, protection. The Chairperson of SAR is the specialized state authority which applies the national legislation.

SAR has two RRCs, one in the city of Sofia and another in the village of Banya. Following registration of the asylum-seekers, the RRCs provide accommodation, medical checks and social and medical assistance. The procedures for determining which country has jurisdiction to consider the asylum application and grant the respective status to foreigners is also conducted at the RRCs. The capacity of RRC Sofia is 450 beds and in RRC Banya it is 80 beds. It should be borne in mind, however, that the capacity of the RRCs is actually smaller because men, women, and families are accommodated separately.

A Transit Centre was opened at the beginning of May of 2012 in the village of Pastrogor. It will provide registration, accommodation and medical checks. Procedures for determining the state which is responsible for the application for status determination and the fast-track procedure for foreigners seeking protection will be conducted there.¹² The capacity of the Transit Centre is 300 beds.

SAR also has an Integration Centre (IC Sofia). It provides Bulgarian language training, vocational qualification courses as well as other activities necessary for the integration of foreigners seeking or granted protection in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Rights and obligations of foreigners seeking protection

A foreigner may state his/her wish to be granted protection before an official at the SAR (Article 58(3)) or before another government authority which must immediately forward the application to SAR (Article 58(4)). The BP is usually the first authority to which asylum-seekers have access. Until the end of 2011, asylum-seekers were detained under an order of BP in the SCTAF for the time between

the filing of the asylum application at the border and their release by the SAR as regulated in Article 58(4) and Article 67a(2)(1) of the LAR.¹³

In the cases where a foreigner detained in the SCTAF states his/her wish to be granted protection, the officials at the Migration Directorate of MoI must immediately notify and send all documents to SAR (Article 10 of the *Ordinance for the responsibilities of and coordination among the State agencies*). According to data from the Open Society Institute – Sofia (Vankova 2012:30), asylum-seekers are detained in the SCTAF for two months on average after they have filed their application until they are released by SAR in accordance with Article 58(4) and Article 67a(2)(1) of the LAR. This is due to the fact that the LAR does not regulate a time limit for registration of asylum-seekers' applications. According to official statements of the Chairperson of SAR,¹⁴ the delay is due to the Agency not having adequate capacity to accommodate all asylum-seekers. For that reason, detained foreigners give an external address they can go to, so that SAR registers their application faster.¹⁵

According to Article 29 of the LAR, during the RSD procedure, asylum-seekers have the right to: remain on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria; receive shelter, food, social and health

¹¹ In effect from 1 December, 2002, last amended, SG, No. 39/20 May 2011.

¹² For more information, see Article 47 of the LAR.

¹³ According to the latest amendments to the *Ordinance for the responsibilities of and coordination among the state agencies implementing Council Regulation (EC) No. 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the other Member States by a third-country national, Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1560/2003 of 2 September 2003 laying down detailed rules for the application of Council regulation (EC) No. 343/2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national, Council Regulation (EC) No. 2725/2000 of 11 December 2000 concerning the establishment of "EURODAC" for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of the Dublin Convention and Council Regulation (EC) No. 407/2002 of 28 February 2002 laying down certain rules to implement Regulation (EC) No. 2725/2000 concerning the establishment of "EURODAC" for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of the Dublin Convention*, the BP no longer has the right to place asylum-seekers who have filed an application at the border in these homes.

¹⁴ See for example, a statement by SAR's Chairperson Nikola Kazakov made on 7.02.2012; <http://goo.gl/yNqTo>.

¹⁵ For more information on the access to territory and the protection procedure, see BHC's 2010 Annual Border Monitoring Report.

assistance; and receive psychological support and translation and interpreting. In relation to Article 29 of the LAR, the Chairperson of SAR issues an order every year determining the amount of support available to asylum-seekers. The amount is determined on the basis of the minimum social assistance available to Bulgarian nationals which to date amounts to BGN 65 (EUR 33) per month. Asylum-seekers have the right to access the labour market if, for reasons beyond their control, the procedure is not completed within one year of filing the asylum application.

Housing of asylum-seekers

SAR has the obligation to accommodate asylum-seekers at a transit centre, an RRC or at another shelter, following an assessment of the asylum-seeker's health condition, marital status and financial situation. When asylum-seekers have the means to sustain their basic needs, at their request they may be granted permission to take up accommodation at their own expense at an address of their choice during the procedure, and in such cases they are not entitled to financial and material assistance from SAR (Article 29 of the LAR). Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (or unaccompanied minors granted protection) may be provided accommodation with relatives or close acquaintances, with a foster family, with a specialized institution or at another place of accommodation having specialized facilities for individuals who are minors and under the legal age.

In addition to the assistance provided by SAR, the Helping Hand Project provides alternative housing to asylum-seekers in Bulgaria, implemented by the Foundation for Support of Victims of Crime and the Fight against Corruption, and was financed within the 2010 Annual Programme of the European Refugee Fund. The programme funded provision of alternative housing through NGOs for new asylum applicants who did not meet the priority criteria under the LAR to be accommodated in the existing RRCs.¹⁶ According to the project manager of the Helping Hand Project, priority is given to the accommodation of the most distressed vulnerable groups (Geneva 2011). The project value is EUR 49,944 and the allocations are used mainly for repair, furniture and equipment. At the time of preparation of this report, five foreigners were benefitting from this alternative housing. The project is to be completed by 31 May 2012. SAR provided a similar model of external accommodation until 2002-2003, when the number of asylum applications was higher (Vankova 2010).

Rights and obligations of foreigners granted refugee or humanitarian status

According to Article 32 of the LAR, foreigners granted refugee status have the rights and obligations of Bulgarian nationals, with the exception of the rights to participate in general and municipal elections, in national and regional referenda, and to the establishment of political parties. Foreigners granted humanitarian status have the rights and obligations of of aliens holding permanent residence permits in the Republic of Bulgaria (Article 36 of the LAR).¹⁷

Foreigners who have been granted protection are obliged, within 14 days after receiving the decision granting status, to present themselves at the municipality where they will reside, so that they can be entered in the population register (Article 35 of the LAR). This means that the securing of housing and the availability of a permanent address is an important condition for civil registration, obtaining identity documents, social assistance and for registration with the Labour Offices (Radeva 2010:19).

The law provides that foreigners granted refugee or humanitarian status may be provided with financial support for housing for a period of up to six months from the date of coming into effect of the decision granting status (Article 32 (3)). This means that the period of their stay in RRC Sofia can be extended. However, the extension is applied only to a limited number of vulnerable refugees.

Foreigners granted refugee or humanitarian status have the right to family reunification within the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria (Article 34) and may acquire Bulgarian citizenship in accordance with the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship (Article 38).¹⁸

According to the NPIR in the Republic of Bulgaria (2011 – 2013),¹⁹ every foreigner with refugee or humanitarian status in the Republic of Bulgaria has, for a period of up to one year from status granting, access to financial assistance for housing, social assistance,

¹⁶ Reference number BG ERF 2010/04-A1.01.

¹⁷ For more information, see the Law for Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria (LFRB).

¹⁸ See Section 4 of the LAR for the documents issued to foreigners who have filed asylum applications or have been granted protection.

¹⁹ Approved with a decision of the CoM on 05.01.2011, Protocol No. 1.

health insurance, Bulgarian language training, social and cultural adaptation, vocational training, interpreting and translation services and assistance in the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms.

According to the Internal Rules for implementation of integration measures for newly recognised refugees in the NPIR, persons granted humanitarian or refugee status may file an application to enroll in the programme within two months from receiving protection under the LAR. Interviews are conducted with applicants, Individual Integration Plans are prepared and, following approval by the Integration Commission, contracts for participation in the programme are signed with the Chairperson of SAR. Programme participants commit to regularly attend Bulgarian language training, social and cultural adaptation and vocational training courses for a period of one year.

The integration measures laid down in the NPIR include:

- Bulgarian language training – 600 study hours, and social and cultural adaptation up to 200 study hours. Training ends with a final exam. Study groups of six to 10 participants are formed. When the group comprises fewer than six individuals with refugee or humanitarian status, it can be filled up with asylum-seekers. Bulgarian language training courses according to an individual programme are envisaged, for example, for mothers with children aged one to three who are not placed in a nursery, their inclusion in the programme may be put off for one year at their request;
- Vocational training – 198 study hours, ending with an exam. Training in the professions of hairdressing, cosmetics and tailoring are provided in groups of six to 10 participants. When the group comprises fewer than six individuals with refugee or humanitarian status, it can be filled up with asylum-seekers;
- Vocational training courses outside SAR are envisaged. A good example in that respect is the cooperation and joint activity agreement between SAR and the Employment Agency concluded on 22 December 2011 aiming to improve refugees' access to employment and professional fulfillment. Some of the activities include development and implementation of targeted programmes in support of refugees' access to the labour market by developing professional skills in a real working environment; development and maintenance of a database of the education and vocational qualification of refugees to inform the planning of measures for improvement of their vocational qualification, requalification and

job seeking; organisation of specialized labour exchanges with the participation of potential employers, in support of refugees' access to employment, etc;

- Consultation and assistance for inclusion in vocational qualification and employment programmes;
- Interpreting and translation services in support of the exercise of fundamental rights and implementation of other activities related to the integration of refugees.

The national programme also envisages integration packages for the participating refugees, which include the following social assistance and social investment for a period of up to one year from receiving the status decision under the LAR:

- Lump-sum social assistance,²⁰ paid on the fourth month after inclusion in the programme. The specific amount of the lump-sum social assistance is determined by the Integration Committee following a visit by an expert from the Integration Centre of SAR to the refugee's address;
- Targeted lump-sum assistance for the issuing of an ID card up to the amount of the cost of issue, but not more than the minimum guaranteed income;
- Bursary for the period of Bulgarian language training, social and cultural adaptation and vocational training, presently at the rate of BGN4 per day;²¹
- Monthly financial support covering the price of renting accommodation and the utility bills for the persons included in the programme, as follows:
 - Up to BGN170 per single person;
 - Up to BGN300 per two-member family;
 - Up to BGN350 per three-member family;
 - Up to BGN400 per four-member family;
 - Up to BGN450 per 5+-member family;

²⁰ Under the procedure and at an amount as laid down in the Implementing Regulations of the Social Assistance Act (IRSA).

²¹ An amount laid down in the Action Plan to the Employment Promotion Act until the end of 2011.

- Monthly health insurance of the participants;²²
- Weekly transport cards during the courses for Bulgarian language training, social and cultural adaptation and vocational training;
- Payment of kindergarten fees for 10 children per year, BGN60 per child;
- Targeted lump-sum assistance for families with children enrolled in 1st grade at a state or municipal school – for 10 children.²³
- Monthly assistance for children going to Bulgarian state and municipal schools – for 20 children – at BGN35 per child;
- Study materials for the courses of Bulgarian language training, social and cultural adaptation and vocational training – for 60 individuals per year;
- Study materials for the children under legal age of the individuals included in the programme who attend Bulgarian schools (notebooks, manuals, school aids) – for 20 children per year;
- Study and educational visits of historical sites across the country – for 60 individuals per year.

Notwithstanding the opportunities offered by the integration programme, it has to be borne in mind that its capacity is very limited. SAR includes 60 individuals per year in the programme. In fact, in 2011, out of 192 foreigners granted refugee or humanitarian status, only 83 (44%) were included in the programme, of whom 37 (19%) completed the programme partially and only 26 (14%) continued to benefit from its opportunities in 2012.²⁴

Other opportunities for housing

For each municipality, the terms and procedures for identifying housing needs and accommodation in municipal housing are determined by an ordinance of the **municipal council**. In the big cities, municipal housing stock is limited and access to such accommodation is very difficult for Bulgarian nationals as well as for persons granted protection (Radeva and Donova 2010: 20). **Furthermore, due to the discriminatory provisions of the ordinances of most big cities, municipal housing is actually not possible for persons with granted status. For example, the municipal councils of Sofia and Plovdiv have set a requirement that at least one family (household) member should be a**

Bulgarian national having address registration and permanent address on the territory of the municipality for more than 10 consecutive years.²⁵ The municipal council of Varna requires that the applicant and the family members should be Bulgarian nationals and should not have dual citizenship.²⁶

Homeless foreigners granted protection status can be accommodated in the **Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Homeless Individuals** on the territory of Stolichna Municipality (Sofia City Municipality). For example, Sveti Dimitar Temporary Accommodation Centre²⁷ has 270 beds and accommodates homeless adults. This accommodation is provided in accordance with the Social Assistance Act (SAA) and the IRSAA, on the basis of an order of the Director of the local Social Assistance Directorate (SAD). Housing premises are furnished and equipped with all basic necessities. The centre provides medical services, assistance and preparation of documents for submission to the Occupational Expert Medical Board (OEMB), as well as documents for finding jobs for the accommodated unemployed individuals.

The Emergency Accommodation Centre for Homeless Individuals²⁸ was opened on 20 December 2011 in Sofia. It offers hot food and accommodation. The Emergency Centre has 30 beds. It was built under a pilot project implemented by Stolichna Municipality and financed from the municipal budget, until 31 March 2012.

These municipal centres fail to offer real opportunities for temporary accommodation and short-term solutions to the issue of homelessness, in particular in the winter

²² The health insurance payment is determined with the Law on the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) Budget at half the minimum social security income for self-insured persons.

²³ According to the Law on Family Benefits for Children.

²⁴ Data by SAR, made available to UNHCR.

²⁵ See: *Ordinance on the terms and procedure of management and disposal of municipal housing within the territory of Stolichna Municipality and Ordinance on the terms and procedure for identification of housing needs, accommodation in municipal housing and sale thereof.*

²⁶ *Ordinance on the terms and procedure for identification of the housing needs of citizens, accommodation in municipal housing and sale thereof.*

²⁷ Information on the centres is available on the website of the Social Assistance Directorate of Stolichna Municipality: URL: <http://dsd.sofia.bg/>.

²⁸ *Internal regulations of the emergency accommodation centre for homeless individuals.*

months, due to regulatory obstacles. Asylum-seekers cannot be accommodated in the Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Homeless Individuals, whereas the Emergency Accommodation Centre for Homeless Individuals requires, in addition to an identity document, a criminal record certificate and, in practice, limits the opportunities for most of the asylum-seekers and persons granted protection to benefit from these alternatives.

1.2.2. Statistical data on refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria

Available statistical data about the number of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria show that in the period from 1993 to 2011, between 1,000²⁹ and 1,050³⁰ individuals on average per year stated their wish to be granted protection in the country.³¹ A peculiar peak is registered between 1999 and 2003; the number of asylum-seekers reaching almost 3,000 individuals in 2002 (Figure 1). It should be noted that

the trend observed is not a unique phenomenon; the data from Bulgaria fits well with the general trend of numbers of asylum-seekers in the EU over the reviewed period.

²⁹ According to Eurostat data.

³⁰ According to SAR data.

³¹ A comparison between the Eurostat data and SAR data shows discrepancies which cannot be explained only with the data rounding system applied by the Statistical Office of the European Union. According to the statistical correctness standard of the Eurostat metabase, in the period from 2004 to 2007 it is admitted in respect of the data on all Member States (including Bulgaria) that they are "conditional", which means that there may be discrepancies between these data and those published by the national statistical units. This report uses Eurostat data because it offers wide access to information on asylum-seekers by country of origin.

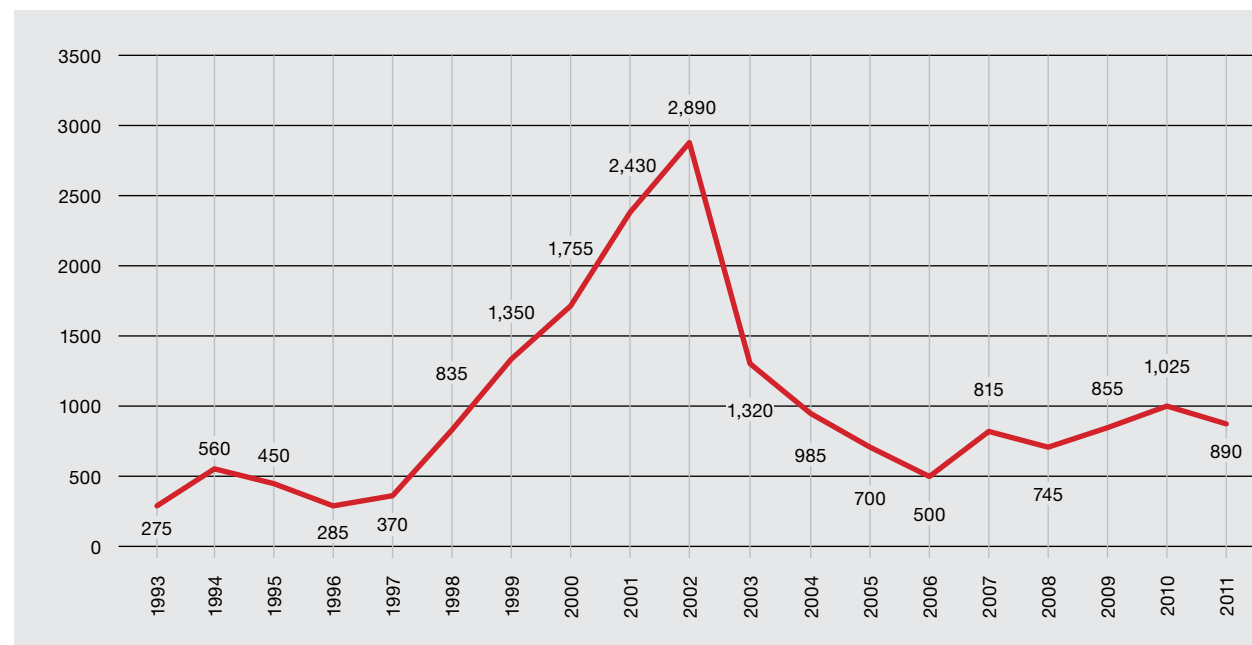


Figure 1: Number of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria 1993-2011 (rounded data)

Source: Eurostat, SAR.

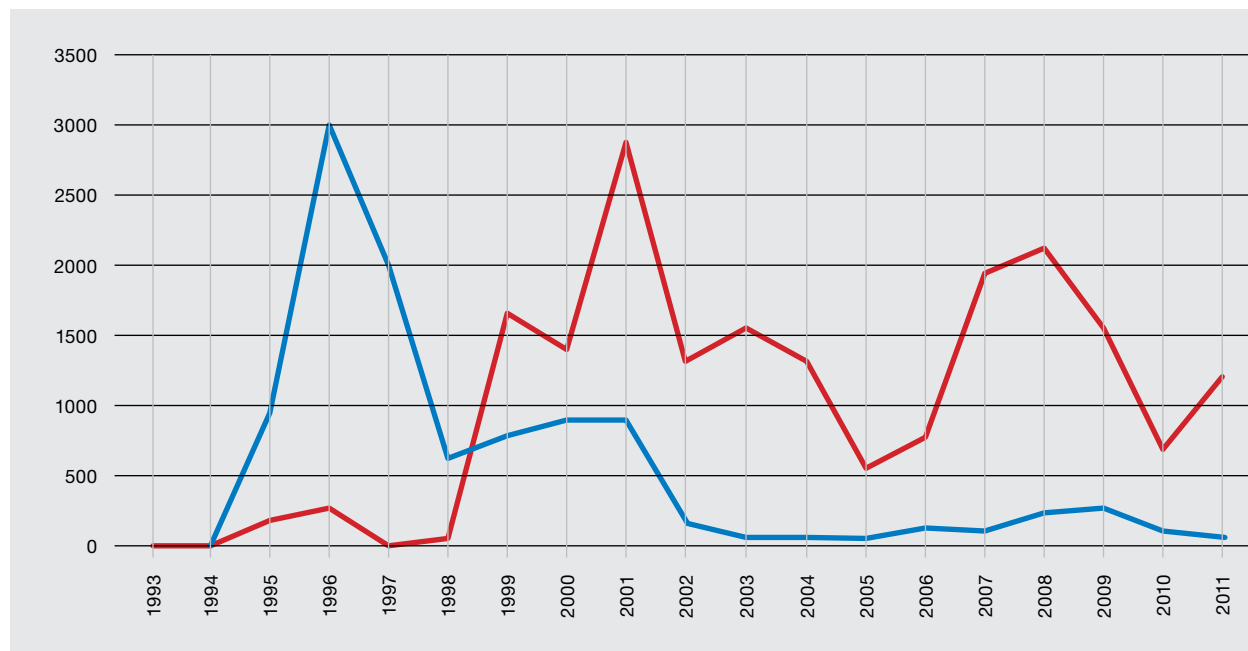


Figure 2: Relative shares of persons with granted refugee and humanitarian status in Bulgaria 1993-2011 (rounded data)

Source: author's calculations on the basis of SAR data.

refugee status

humanitarian status

Statistically (see Fig. 2), most people who have sought asylum in Bulgaria in recent years have not been granted protection. Very often, they appeal SAR's decision and on such grounds can remain in the country for many years, which demonstrates that the current procedures lead to their extreme marginalization and exclusion from society.

There are statistics on the SAR website of the top 10 countries of origin of asylum-seekers, for the whole period of 1993 to February 2012, as well as for the first two months of 2012 (Table 1).

Table 2 presents Eurostat annual data on asylum-seekers in Bulgaria from selected countries of origin from 2003 to 2011.

Table 1: Top 10 countries of origin, by number of submitted asylum applications

Country	01. 1993 – 02. 2012	01. - 02. 2012
Afghanistan	5,732	15
Iraq	5,008	56
Armenia	1,868	n.d.
Iran	946	5
Stateless	928	14
Serbia and Montenegro	775	n.d.
Nigeria	520	n.d.
Algeria	454	n.d.
Turkey	387	n.d.
Syria	374	16

Source: SAR

Table 2: Number of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria by selected country of origin from 2003 to 2011 (rounded data)

Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	total
Iraq	205	40	45	65	530	350	305	450	345	2,335
Afghanistan	470	395	355	260	50	55	60	60	90	1,795
Armenia	50	30	20	30	10	70	40	60	35	345
Iran	95	25	15	20	20	20	50	60	35	340
Algeria	150	45	5	5	5	5	35	35	25	310
Nigeria	95	80	5	10	10	20	15	10	20	265
Syria	10	20	10	10	10	20	30	50	85	245
Somalia	55	45	15	0	0	15	10	0	40	180
Pakistan	15	15	40	10	5	0	10	15	25	135
Turkey	45	10	10	5	5	10	25	10	5	125
Bangladesh	5	55	15	5	15	5	5	5	5	115
Lebanon	0	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	10	65
Sudan	0	5	0	0	10	10	5	20	0	50
Morocco	0	0	0	0	0	5	15	15	20	55

Source: SAR

1.3. Methodology of field work

1.3.1. Sample

With the exception of the asylum-seekers placed in RRC Banya and RRC Sofia, as well as the refugees included in the courses of the IC Sofia, preliminary research of housing and homelessness among the other refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria cannot be carried out. The reason is that there is a lack of a unified register or of sufficient information on the total number and places of residence of the refugees who remained in the country after they were granted status. There is also a lack of a unified publicly accessible register covering homeless individuals in Bulgaria. Some of the District Police Departments (DPDs) in the country, as well as the Home for Temporary Accommodation of Adults (HTAA) have registers of the individuals incriminated for vagrancy and begging in their territory, but these are for official use only and are inaccessible according to the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA). For that reason, the

approach chosen by this research team relies on qualitative data collection methods (Silverman 2000; Kuzel 1992) in order to outline different typologies of the life situations of refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria.

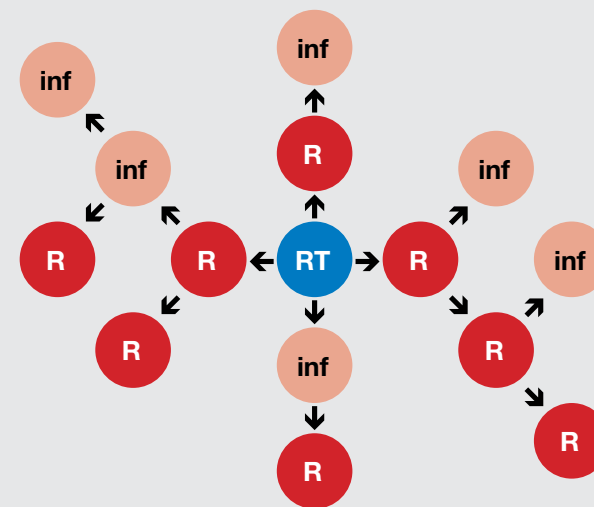
Theoretical or purposeful sampling also poses certain risks (Coyne 1997). On the one hand, a precedence principle can be used and a specific case can be studied, placed in its own social environment. This approach would be appropriate for the research of a homogenous group or a relatively isolated cultural tradition (Pamporov 2008). However, refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria are by no means a homogenous population; there are, in fact, many small communities based on different identity indicators: nationality, mother tongue (for example, Pashto, Somali, Kurdish), second local language spoken (for example, Arabic, Farsi), European language spoken (for example, English, French, Russian); religious affiliation; and last but not least, race. This implies existence of different cultural models and different social networks, hence, different social practices in respect to housing and the

survival strategies in case of homelessness. At the same time, the refugee communities do not live in isolation; they are in daily contact and even have a relationship with the social model and institutional context of the country. For these reasons, the simple case sampling loses its effectiveness.

The snowball method could also lead the analysis in a wrong direction. Referral from actual to potential respondent usually takes place within a particular social network (Goodman 1961). However, the existence of a particular social network implies sharing of certain similar social characteristics. By following the first respondent, the study could be limited within a narrow cultural horizon and a single-line social experience and thus a significant portion of the refugees' specifics could remain unregistered. Nevertheless, the snowball method has an invaluable contribution as regards the accessibility of otherwise anonymous individuals of unknown place of residence (Patton, 1990). In order to overcome the shortcomings of the method, a polycentric approach of simultaneously entering several parallel social networks was chosen. A "referent" was used as applicable – the person, to whom the researcher has been referred by an informant, was not interviewed and was only used as a source of contact with other individuals from the target groups.

Some of the identified stakeholder institutions such as RRC Sofia, RRC Banya, IC Sofia, BHC, BRC, the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, the Multi-Culti Collective,³³ as well as the researchers' own social contacts were used as primary referents. The theoretical sampling model is illustrated in Figure 3. It reflects the polycentric scheme of exponential limited snowball sampling with four possible lines of development discussed clockwise, as follows: 1) the research team (RT) contacts a referent (R) who refers them to a refugee or an asylum-seeker to serve as an informant (INF); 2) the research team contacts a referent that refers them to two individuals from the target groups. One of them is chosen as an informant and the other is used as a next referent who in turn refers the team to two individuals but is not interviewed even if he/she belongs to the target group; 3) the research team contacts an informant directly, however, the next person given by the informant is not interviewed but is used as a referent for another informant; 4) the informant given by the primary referent in turn plays the role of a direct referent, although he/she has been interviewed.

Figure 3: Theoretical scheme of the selection model



In order to control the possible distortion of information and to avoid interviewing too many individuals from the target group with similar social and demographic characteristics, the team chose the *maximum diversity* model. The main purpose of this type of sampling is to integrate a small number of cases that are maximally different from one another, in order to reveal the full spectrum of variations and nuances in a particular social phenomenon (Patton 1990; Miles & Huberman 1994; Flick 1998). The main

³² In order to increase the precision of protection of individuals, Eurostat rounds data to 0 and 5 – respectively, 1 and 2 downwards, 3 and 4 upwards, 6 and 7 downwards, 8 and 9 upwards, i.e. 3.7 = 5.

³³ Multi-Culti Collective is a registered NGO presenting the different foreign cultures in Bulgaria. With the aid of traditional cuisine, stories about the countries of origin, discussions, dances and music, Multi-Culti Kitchen gathers Bulgarians and foreigners every month, breaks stereotypes, builds tolerance and raises the awareness within the host society about the new minorities and the challenges of their integration. To date, the platform has presented the Kurdish, Congo, Pakistani, American and Iraqi culture and way of life, as well as those of the members of the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria.

principle when selecting respondents is the gradual integration of the different groups until uniform non-personified information saturation is reached. Given the fact that fieldwork was carried out simultaneously at several locations by several people, a preliminary stratification matrix was developed in order to ensure diversity (Figure 4). The main purpose of the matrix is to ensure diversity of the sample at the following levels:

- Status: refugees, asylum-seekers
- Housing status: homeless, accommodated
- Family status: single, with family
- Gender: male, female
- Age: unaccompanied person under the legal age, young adult, older adult

- Country of origin (nationality) – key target countries agreed with the UNHCR to participate after the launch of the project: Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan
- Belonging (ethnic group/language) – main target groups agreed with the UNHCR to participate after the launch of the project: Arabs, Kurds, Pashtuns, Farsi, Palestinians, stateless persons

The advantage of this type of sampling is that it allows for the pre-stratified groups to be changed or replaced in the course of the research by more adequate ones *vis-à-vis* the studied community (Charmaz 1983; Flick 1998).

Figure 4: Structure of the preliminary selection matrix

Refugees		Homeless					Accommodated				
		Single			Of family		Single			Of family	
Country of origin (nationality)	Belonging (ethnic group, language)	male	female	Unaccompanied minor	male	female	male	female	Unaccompanied minor	male	female
A	A1										
	A2										
	An										
n countries											

Refugees		Homeless					Accommodated				
		Single			Of family		Single			Of family	
Country of origin (nationality)	Belonging (ethnic group, language)	male	female	Unaccompanied minor	male	female	male	female	Unaccompanied minor	male	female
	A1										
	A2										
	An										
n countries											

Ultimately, in the course of the research, 34 interviews were conducted with individuals who were either granted refugee or humanitarian status or were asylum-seekers. Their breakdown by country of origin (nationality) is as follows:

Iraq	12
Afghanistan	5
Other Middle Eastern Country ³⁴	9
North Africa	3
Sub-Saharan Africa	5

Depending on their mother tongue, these respondents were divided into the following language groups:

Arabic languages	15
Iranian languages (Farsi, Pashtu, Kurdish)	9
Other Eurasian languages	6
African languages	4

The average age of interviewed refugees and asylum-seekers is 30 years nine months. Respondents can be grouped in the following age brackets:

17-24	7
25-30	8
31-37	10
43-54	9

As regards the two key categories of the research (housing and legal status), the interviewees are divided into the following six groups:

Status	Accommodated in RRC	Living at an external address	Homeless	Total
Refugee/humanitarian	4	8	4	16
Asylum-seeker	10	4	4	18
Total	14	12	8	34

³⁴ In order to respect the dignity and the personal immunity of the interviewees, in cases which could lead to disclosure of their identity, the data will be aggregated up to a level that does not permit identification.

1.3.2. Method of registration and fieldwork tools

The tools are chosen so as to ensure comparability of the data collected by the different fieldworkers during the interviews of respondents with radically different cultural backgrounds and present-day social situations. The basic methods of registration used by the team include direct observation, informal interviews, problem-centered in-depth interviews and action research.

Direct observation

Direct observation has some advantages which have been taken into account when applying this method (Pamporov 2007). First, it preserves a certain distance between the researchers and the studied social environment. This allows a clearer research perspective, because distance shortening and empathy in respect of a particular culture could distort the collection or presentation of the information and thus have a negative effect on the reliability of the analysis. Second, it allows focusing on a particular social phenomenon in its own context. Third, it saves a lot of time. Between the two main direct observation strategies – being evident and active or being invisible – the choice was naturally made in favor of the first one for the work with the refugee communities. It is simply impossible for an outsider to remain unnoticed in the RRC or the places where homeless individuals spend the night. Notwithstanding that informants might begin to “present” what they want us to see (Bernard 1940), the method is effective in relatively closed communities due to the higher accessibility of respondents. Through the informal information channels contained in the social network of each interlocutor, the studied community quickly understands first, that there is an external individual in the particular locus and second, that this individual is not a threat to the welfare of the group.

The informal interview can be viewed as the next step after direct observation but it can also be used in parallel with the latter. The researcher conducts a free conversation with an individual from a particular social environment in connection with a phenomenon registered during the direct observation, asking some of the preliminary theoretical questions or discussing a theme initiated by the respondent. The informal interview is appropriate for the first days of fieldwork when the researcher still needs to be more flexible in choosing an approach to the target groups, seeking the

balance between the research interest and the threshold of sensitive issues beyond which the respondent will “withdraw into himself” and will not share his personal experience or attitude. Informal interviews were used in the preliminary talks with the experts on refugee matters in order to outline the background knowledge about institutional practices and identify the potential risks for the research.

Semi-structured problem-centered interviews

This is the basic data collection method used by the research team. In order to achieve comparability and completeness of the data collected by this method, an interview guide was developed in two variants – for homeless and accommodated individuals (See Annex 1). Data were registered by taking notes and, where the interviewees agreed, also by Dictaphone recording. The problem-centered interview is a method which aims to neutralize the alleged contradiction between being directed by a preliminary theoretical framework and the claimed unbiasedness of the inductive method (Witzel 2000). It is based on having a clear idea about the type of information to be collected from the respondents, but the control exercised is limited to particular thematic fields offered as open-ended questions. The aim is to predispose the individuals to express themselves with their own notions but at a pace imposed by the researcher.

Action research

This is a long-established method in the research of minority and vulnerable groups. Unlike inclusive observation where the researcher attempts to blend in with the environment in order to understand the hidden meanings (Pamporov 2007), action research is based on a cycle of steps which aim to study the result of a targeted positive action in a particular vulnerable environment (Lewin 1946). Collection of donations for refugees and asylum-seekers was planned and carried out within the project and the results of the provision of these donations to individuals living in poor housing conditions or threatened by homelessness were studied.



Palestinian asylum-seekers share a room while staying in a reception centre in Banya, Bulgaria. © UNHCR/B. Szandelszky/2010

2. Research results

2.1. Migration models

The research showed three different ways for people to cross the Bulgarian border before applying for protection:

1) Human smuggling where individuals are smuggled in trucks or cargo areas of vessels

Arman³⁵ (male, age 36) is from Afghanistan. He first went to Iran, then to Turkey and from there to Bulgaria, always illegally, aided by traffickers. He travelled with his sister and mother with whom he lives now. They were caught while crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border and were held in custody for two days after which they spent two-and-a-half months at the detention facility in Svilengrad, accused of illegally crossing the Bulgarian border.³⁶ Bahtawar (male, age 24) and his spouse, as well as Gulsar (male, age 43) arrived in Bulgaria in the same way but at a different time. The Iranian Aras (male, age 36) and the Syrian Adad (male, age 24) arrived in Turkish TIR-trucks. Adam (male, age 31) arrived in Bulgaria in a vessel from Congo.

2) Crossing the border on foot, aided by “Kaçakçı”³⁷

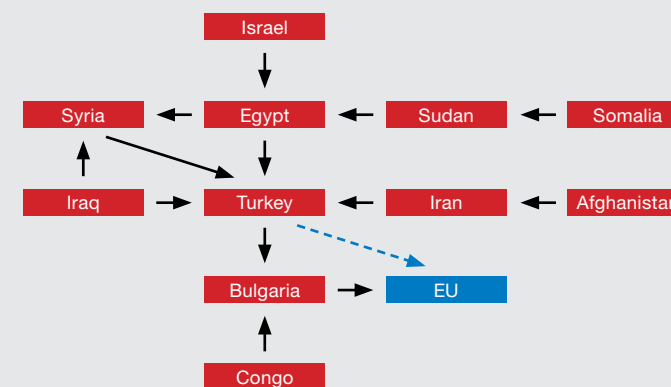
Dilawar (male, age 32) is from Afghanistan where he left his spouse and his five children. Unlike Arman and Bahtawar, however, he did not have enough money, so the transit via Iran and Turkey took him about half a year. He crossed all three borders on foot, aided by Kaçakçı. The story of the Iraqi Ali (male, age 54), who took a week to cross Turkey, is similar:

“crossed the border nine days ago with a man I believe they call ‘kaçakçı’. I came from Iraq to Syria legally, and from Syria to Turkey where I was almost seven or eight days. They took me on illegal roads, on the checkpoints. Then they left me to another one. The other one fetched me up to the border line. He said “Bulgaria is in that direction”. And I said “Ok, don’t worry”. I jumped the first fence from Turkey to Bulgaria. After five hundred meters I came to the police and I said (he raises his hands up and smiles). I was exhausted because of my heart... I was exhausted”.

3) Crossing the border openly, but with false documents

The Palestinian named Bakri (male, age 43) traveled by plane from Cairo to Istanbul. In Istanbul he procured a false Dutch passport and boarded a bus to Amsterdam. However, the border police officers doubted his Dutch identity and requested that he show an identity card of “a European national”. As he did not expect such a thing and did not have such a card, he was detained at the border for 24 hours until the authenticity of the passport he produced was established. The check showed that the passport was false and the authorities informed him that he was either to file a refugee status application or would be deported back to Israel.

Figure 5: Migration flow model based on the interviews conducted



³⁵ For the sake of personal data protection, all names in the report have been replaced by interpretants from the name system of the respective country of origin, alphabetically in the order of citing in the report.

³⁶ The Penal Code contains a special provision concerning asylum-seekers – Article 279(5), according to which those who enter the country in order to benefit from the right to asylum according to the Constitution shall not be punishable. The prosecution closes the file where it is established that the foreigner seeks asylum, but this delays his transfer to the RRC of SAR.

³⁷ Kaçakçı - Turkish – “smuggler”.

2.2. Asylum application procedure

As per the existing legislation, when an individual reaches the territory of Bulgaria and states before any authority that he/she is in need of protection, the authority concerned must refer the case to SAR. The latter should initiate procedures to check the truthfulness of the statements and, respectively, to grant or refuse status. Asylum-seekers can express their statement in any form. However, BHC's 2010 human rights report shows that even the foreigners seeking protection who manage to register their application for protection at the border, cannot exercise their rights to accommodation, social assistance and health insurance, as most of them are detained at the SCTAF instead of at a transit centre or RRC. This practice dates back to 2007 and the state authorities use as an excuse, the insufficient capacity of RRC ("Human Rights 2010", BHC).

The findings of the present research confirm the observations of the BHC. Immediately upon his detention at the border, Bahtawar stated that he wanted protection. Nevertheless, according to his story, the BP did not allow him to file an application, transporting him to the SCTAF in Busmantsi instead. In his words, he was not allowed to file an application until two months after the date of his detention. The staff at SCTAF explained to him that SAR was too slow in clarifying his case and deciding whether he had the right to apply for status recognition. In fact, SAR officers simply failed to come and examine the applications of asylum-seekers thus causing undue delay of the procedure. Arman also argues that he stated at the border that he was seeking asylum and wanted to file an application. His story implies that the BP actually respected his rights and brought him to SAR but the absence of an interpreter³⁸ and the formal completion of forms made him feel afraid of the uncertainty of the situation: *"I did not understand what was happening. One day the police officers simply put me in a van and brought me here"*. Kasim (male, age 47) stayed in the SCTAF for 75 days before being accommodated at an RRC where he was eventually refused status because his wife was in Syria. He commented with irony in his appeal: *"I am applying for humanitarian status because I am old, sick and because of the situation in Iraq. But if the humanitarian status is not possible to get in Bulgaria I will apply for an animal status"*.

2.3. Housing and homelessness

A key component of Bulgaria's policy for the treatment and integration of refugees and asylum-seekers is the provision of housing satisfying basic conditions. Whether the individuals are applying for asylum or have received protection, adequate housing conditions are one of the first steps toward ensuring successful integration.

2.3.1. The formal model of accommodation of asylum-seekers

The accommodation of asylum-seekers to a great extent relates to the course of their status application procedure. Nevertheless, this chapter does not dwell on their legal status *per se*, but on the specific trajectory of housing. A model of accepting immigrants upon their entry on the territory of Bulgaria requires having operational Transit Centres in place at key border checkpoints. These types of institutions must play the role of a first step, predetermining the next steps of the procedure for asylum-seekers and setting, according to the regulatory framework, the specific phases they must go through. The absence of such units in Bulgaria, until the opening of the Transit Centre in Pastrogor in May of 2012,³⁹ is a key prerequisite for the different types of housing "trajectories" of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria.

The fieldwork phase of the research did not cover the conditions at the SCTAFs. These have already been presented exhaustively in the report of the Open Society Institute – Sofia (Vankova 2012). The conditions in these homes need to be taken into account because many of the asylum-seekers file applications after they have been

³⁸ According to SAR's formal comments on the draft of this research in April 2012, there are no cases in which SAR interviewers would carry out an interview without the services of a qualified interpreter. This is also true for cases of rare languages, for which interpreters are provided from another EU country via a video-conference link, under the project "Common Pool of Interpreters GDISK".

³⁹ A Transit Centre was opened at the beginning of May 2012 in the village of Pastrogor. It will provide registration, accommodation, medical checks, conduct procedures for determining the state responsible for the application for status determination and conduct fast-track procedures for foreigners seeking protection. As stated above its capacity is 300 beds.

placed there. According to the information presented in the report of the Open Society Institute – Sofia, they stay there for two months on average. Due to the threat of continued coerced accommodation in the home, some of them state a fictitious external address and later remain homeless or live in very bad conditions below the poverty line. Thus, detention in SCTAF proves to be a determinant for the decision of a very large part of asylum-seekers and refugees whether to remain in Bulgaria and become integrated.

Registration and Reception Centers as a form of housing

Accommodation at the RRCs of SAR is the next logical step after the individual files an asylum application in Bulgaria. Respondents' answers present these centres as the best possible accommodation option that the State can provide in terms of living conditions. This, however, does not preclude complaints by centres' inhabitants, as repeatedly pointed out in UNHCR reports.⁴⁰ Currently, there are two operational centres in Bulgaria – in Sofia and in the village of Banya. Those accommodated in these centres are considered “lucky”, but this requires an assessment and discussion on the conditions there as well as the problems identified by the respondents themselves.

Accommodation principle

Both RRCs follow a similar principle of accommodation of their inhabitants. The first leading prerequisite is **the distribution by family** – each family in a separate room. This is a practice that the inhabitants view as a positive one insofar as it does not divide the members of a family and provides a cozy environment. It is particularly favorable for small families which get privacy as well as a bigger living space. For example, a three-member family in RRC Sofia inhabits one room and this fully corresponds to the capacity of the premises. This principle is valid for families with small children, as well as for cases of elderly parents and their adult children.

A middle-aged man accommodated in RRC Sofia shares a room with his mother and sister and has no problems with the lack of space, but complains of the neglected material resources. The lack of space, however, can create problems for large families, because the greater the number of family members, the smaller the private space available to each one of them. For example, a young woman in RRC Banya shares a room with her husband and four children,

the premises permitting only the minimum of furniture and almost no space for personal belongings.

The next key principle is that single inhabitants are accommodated **by gender**. Division is also made **by country of origin** of inhabitants, which largely facilitates their cohabitation. The inhabitants themselves can also propose some shifting insofar as all concerned agree. Such a practice is proof that accommodated individuals are allowed certain freedom which agrees with the idea of a lenient treatment in this type of centres. Ali, for example, says: *“We were four in a room. But one of my friends, I shared my food with him and I came here with him ... so I asked him if he wanted to be together with me and sleep on the floor. Thus we are now five in a room”*.

None of the respondents reported having had serious problems with their roommates. Complaints regarding the accommodation principles concern mainly the minimal personal space which is a driver of tension and conflict. *A case of six men accommodated in a room with space for nothing more than the beds of the inhabitants was registered in RRC Sofia.*

Hygienic conditions

Regarding hygienic conditions, there are differences between the situation in RRC Banya and that in RRC Sofia, due to the infrastructure capacities of the buildings. The building in Banya does not permit a separate WC for each room, so there are common bathrooms and toilets for the needs of the accommodated individuals. The staff specifically employed for that purpose is responsible for their cleaning, but the inhabitants often take care of it themselves. Nevertheless, no serious complaints on the part of the RRC inhabitants have been registered. They describe these common rooms as relatively clean, maintained and comfortable and do not complain that they are for common use. The smaller number of WCs makes things easier for the RRC because it implies a smaller amount of funds for maintenance and repair. No complaints about hot water and heating were registered in RRC Banya.

⁴⁰ See: Being a Refugee, 2011 UNHCR, available at: <http://goo.gl/4tSdV>.

In RRC Sofia, each room has a WC. This is more comfortable for the accommodated individuals but at the same time requires more resources for maintenance of the premises. Gyulazar says of the repair problems: *“They don’t fix wash basins here”*. Some respondents in RRC Sofia complain of the lack of hot water in the WCs on the upper floors. These are also complaints registered repeatedly by the UNHCR (Being a Refugee, 2011). Interviewees say that hot water disappears from time to time and does not appear until 2 a.m., and this creates problems with many routine activities like doing laundry and cleaning.

Facilities and their maintenance

There are inconsistencies in the statements of the different respondents as regards the facilities of the centres. No serious criticism of the condition of the rooms was registered in RRC Banya. The rooms feature obsolete and sparse furniture and offer nothing more than basic conditions. There is also a lack of any activities to fill up the everyday life of the inhabitants. Effectively, the only option for entertainment is a TV in a communal room. There are no sports grounds, children’s playgrounds or other facilities to provide variety for the RRC inhabitants. Provision of funds for such purposes is imperative given that the centre is isolated from the nearby bigger towns and the inhabitants lack the financial resources to go to these towns on a regular basis. The need for such planning for the centre’s infrastructure is also proven by the story of one respondent from the centre. She says that now her four children are very ill, one of them has pneumonia, because of the lack of indoor activities, they play in the home’s yard all day, even in the winter, so they fall ill very often.

The individuals accommodated in RRC Sofia are divided into people who are satisfied with the room insofar as it is in adequate condition, and inhabitants who are in rooms that have not been repaired for a long time and so they are completely dissatisfied with the conditions. This is how Arman describes his room: *“There is almost no furniture there except the beds – no desk, no table, it is very dirty and uncomfortable; there is lack of basic things like a mirror. I haven’t seen my face for 20 days. I also haven’t shaved for this long”*. He has filed an application to be moved to another room with his family but has not received any reply yet and thinks that the room is not about to be repaired in the near future.

Health care

RRC Banya has arranged for regular visits by a female doctor practicing in Sliven. Furthermore, one of the social mediators working for BRC also carries out, as part of his responsibilities at BRC, medical checks of the inhabitants who are ill. Patients are sent as necessary to the nearby hospitals in Sliven and Stara Zagora where they undergo medical tests. In this respect, there are no complaints about the access to medical services. Only the purchase of medicine for the inhabitants, who benefit from free medical care but have to pay for the medicine necessary for their treatment, is problematic.

The access to medical care in RRC Sofia follows the same logic – the individuals have the same rights as insured Bulgarians, which do not cover the costs of medicine. This is a serious problem for the refugees who have only minimal resources, in particular in cases of chronic illnesses which require the purchase of medicine on a regular basis.

Provision of food

The RRCs function like hostels, therefore the inhabitants have to buy food themselves. This is linked to the financial resources of the inhabitants, most of whom rely only on the State assistance of BGN 65 per person per month. As these funds are totally insufficient, the inhabitants are forced to constantly ask for help from the other inhabitants in the centre or to rely on funds sent from time to time by relatives. They have to look for the cheapest shops and markets and often starve for days until the next payment in the beginning of the month. This is how Kasim describes the situation: *“I go to the shop over there, buy a coffee for 30 stotinki and ... tighten my belt till the end of the month”*.

The centre in Banya also has a communal kitchen; this makes it easier to maintain better sanitation in the dormitories by not cooking in them, but it is also a convenience for the inhabitants. Ali says: *“The same man I told you had been here for four months, he went to the shop, bought food for us – chicken meat, tea, sugar ... there is a common kitchen on the ground floor with a fridge, there are no problems with this”*.

Integration activities

An obvious advantage of the RRC in Sofia is the existence of an Integration Centre, unlike in Banya where no such centre exists. The inhabitants of the RRC in Sofia have access to language and vocational training courses while they are in the RSD procedure, alongside those who have been granted protection. Those accommodated in Banya only get this opportunity after being granted protection and they need to move to Sofia to access the NPIR. As a consequence, asylum-seekers who have been accommodated in RRC Banya have much less time to learn Bulgarian or complete vocational training, because they don't have access to these courses until they are granted status, and move to Sofia to enroll in the NPIR. Hence they face an unequal "start" after leaving RRC Banya, in particularly in terms of finding a job and housing, for which it is essential to know Bulgarian. In addition, they are at greater risk of homelessness as they need to move within a very short time after receiving protection, which requires additional financial resources and finding a home in Sofia.

2.3.2 Other forms of housing

This Report outlines several scenarios of housing of asylum-seekers and those granted protection, taking into account the whole period of their stay in the country and the specific circumstances that have led to a "transition" from one type of housing to another and ultimately to their current housing situation. These models will outline the types of housing and the living conditions. The different barriers to finding quality housing will be discussed accordingly. In other words, what helps and what impedes asylum-seekers and refugees in their integration process and in particular in securing good housing.

Temporarily accommodated – at risk of homelessness

Having to leave RRC accommodation within 14 days of status granting places great stress on the newly recognised refugees, who in most cases seek help from compatriots and friends. This is an insecure and temporary solution. The trajectory of housing in these cases follows the principle of a temporary short-term solution and cannot guarantee normal housing conditions. One of the

interviewees is a Nigerian who describes the following sequence of events:

Detention at SCTAF → going to an external address → homelessness (lives in an abandoned building) → temporary accommodation with a compatriot for the cold months (total insecurity for longer term)

The lack of any alternative for these refugees means they have to put up with dire conditions. Respondents say they regularly had to go for the night to friends "when there was enough room there". If there was no room, living in the streets was the only alternative. This process involves total insecurity and instability, and is the borderline between *housing with bad living conditions* and a form of *homelessness with sporadic accommodation from acquaintances*.

Shared housing

In cases when refugees have some income, they manage to rent a home. However, rentals often prove unaffordable for a single person and many refugees choose to rent a home with roommates. These cases are typical for single refugees with a certain minimum income (*a family reporting to share their housing with others was not found*). In most cases the roommates are from the same country and this significantly facilitates their cohabitation. This is particularly obvious in the case of an asylum-seeker who has been in a status recognition procedure for more than one year. The "trajectory" of his housing goes along the line of emancipation from the dependence on state institutions and reliance on compatriots and mostly on Christian NGOs. The advantage of this person is first his Christian denomination, but Catholic, not Eastern Orthodox. Furthermore he is a French-speaking individual and the command of a prevalent language facilitated communication with him after his arrival and implied a higher level of awareness. As a consequence of these favorable factors, he found a guarantor and this helped him be released from SCTAF in Busmantsi and be subject to regular reporting to the police. The responsibility for his accommodation was taken by an NGO and was supported by his compatriots. In that sense, the process of his integration and accommodation is totally independent from SAR. The individual concerned lives with a compatriot at an external address in a three-room flat; he has enough living space and all basic amenities in his home. He also

has a good job and secure income; he does not worry about and is confident of preserving his current housing conditions. In this case, the state institutions play almost no supportive role in securing housing, and the trajectory is:

Detention at SCTAF → applying for asylum → going to external address → employment and income (a feeling of security for a long period of time)

The absence of active support on the part of SAR and the independent search of a home and roommates carry certain risks. First, any roommate could cheat the others regarding the rent, deposits and other formalities involved in their cohabitation. In cases where one of the inhabitants is less experienced and does not have a good command of the language, the more experienced individual takes care of all details concerning the renting of a home and this poses certain risks. Adam highlights these risks on the basis of his personal experience with deceitful roommates:

“We had a rental contract with our previous landlords but it was signed by my roommate to whom I gave my share of the rent. In a couple of months he disappeared and it turned out that he had not given any money to the landlord. Thus I had to pay the whole rent for the period. So I understood that all tenants should sign the rent contract. But the landlords should also see to that, I do not know much about contracts and laws in Bulgaria”.

This case proves the need to raise the awareness among the refugees who leave RRCs, with regard to securing housing. SAR should provide information on the legislative specifics of renting a home, the obligations of tenants and what is a legally acceptable and required from a landlord.

Renting a home, in particular in cases with a secure job and regular income, is often connected with assistance from relatives living outside the country, who send money to their relatives in Bulgaria so they can afford to rent a home. This financial assistance can, of course, be viewed as an insecure and irregular source of funds placing the refugees in an insecure and dependant position.

Renting alone

In the course of identifying research respondents, we managed to find people who could afford to rent a separate home. This means a higher degree of comfort, good material and living conditions, and sufficient personal space, even in the context of very small homes. The question is how those living in a separate home manage to afford it, in particular in the bigger cities like Sofia where the rental prices are relatively high. The answer may be that asylum-seekers are being exploited in their employment, and being highly dependent on their employer for their regular income as well as for payment of the rent makes them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Latif (male, age 47) explains that he rents a home in the Druzhba neighborhood and half of the rent is paid by his employer. He works in a restaurant illegally because he does not have documents yet and his employer does not want to deal with the fact that the foreigner has been in a procedure for more than a year and has the right to work legally. He is excessively exploited in his work because he depends on his employer for his income as well as for his home. He sometimes works for 22 hours without a break and finally gets only half of his pay. The story of Latif is a common example of what asylum-seekers experience. His detention in SCTAF in Busmantsi delayed his access to an asylum procedure. He says that he had a fictitious external address and was released from SCTAF but lost his right to accommodation at RRC, to the financial assistance of BGN 65 per month and to access to Bulgarian language training courses. Thus it was impossible for him to find a home because he had no income and did not know Bulgarian. In such a situation, the personal connections with compatriots and friends are triggered again or help from NGOs is solicited. In the first six months after his release from SCTAF he lived with members of the Catholic Church who not only offered him a place to stay but also helped him financially with buying food. With their help he later found a home to rent and an attorney, but this did not save him from the severe exploitation that followed. Ultimately, in this case the trajectory of the housing situation was the following:

SCTAF Busmantsi → release and going to a fictitious external address → accommodation by members of the Catholic Church → separate home (with the help of the Catholic Church)

Family homes with insufficient capacity

One of the best examples of housing is found among refugee families. On the one hand, the stay of a whole family can be seen as an incentive for faster integration in the host society and on the other hand families with small children invoke a much higher level of confidence and landlords are more willing to sign contracts with them.

Accommodation of large families usually involves more precise planning for avoiding potential risks. Usually only one family member comes at first (in most cases the husband), gets established in Bulgaria, is recognised as a refugee and then reunites with his/her family. No cases of detention at SCTAF have been registered with this method of family reunification. During the first phase of their stay on their own, the families benefit from financial assistance from SAR but after a given period they have to procure the funds for rent and utility charges themselves. Those who are unemployed for some reason rely also on help from relatives in their countries of origin. In that light, an aggregated model of the trajectory of their accommodation looks like this:

Illegal arrival in Bulgaria of one member of the family → detention at SCTAF → accommodation at RRC → status recognition → arrival of the other family members in Bulgaria → finding a separate rented home (with the help of friends)

The conditions in the rented home are determined by the income which the family manages to procure, as well as by the size of the family. In general, a large family could hardly afford a home offering sufficient living space for each member. Murad (male, age 42) describes the conditions in this current home: *“Nine of us (his spouse and seven children) live in a separate two-room flat in the Nadezhda 2 neighborhood. The beds and the kitchen furniture and utensils are insufficient. We use central heating, but it is cold and we all stay in one room”*. He was unemployed at the time of the interview and could by no means look for a bigger home to match the needs of the family or secure better heating in the winter.

Serious problems with keeping a job or staying at the same address for a long period are identified even in the case of individuals staying for a long time in separate homes and this gets them back to the starting position in terms of their housing conditions – being dependent on the government housing policy.

Problems with procuring housing with a capacity that satisfies the needs of a middle-sized family are often identified in such situations. They can be attributed to gaps in the policy for provision of municipal housing. Having been granted status and issued identity documents, the individuals satisfy some of the criteria for accommodation in such types of housing, but the lack of a permanent residence at the same address for more than 10 years, as well as many other formalities, prevent them from applying for it. Thus the foreigners are forced to live in housing that is too small for their needs.

Good family housing conditions

Many of those with recognised status who reside in a separate rented home do not voice any complaints about their housing conditions. They are satisfied with the size of their home and manage to procure good material and living conditions, as well as furniture. Of course, this evolves from having steady and regular income and is a result of a long integration process. At present, these individuals have a very good command of Bulgarian and some experience on the Bulgarian labour market. They usually have high-qualification jobs (often in the NGO sector as people who know the specifics of the problems of refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria). The members of this group have also often encountered a lot of difficulties, in particular in the context of looking for a home to rent. They have also had problems with landlords and have had to move. Bakri says SAR staff members have told him that there was a shortage of places in the home and so it was mainly for families and children. In his words, having stayed a month in RRC Sofia, he was made to understand that it was better to find an external address while waiting for a decision. He rented a home near Lavov Most (Lion Bridge). He did not use central heating because he could not afford it but nevertheless his landlady brought a bill claiming that she knew nothing about it, and Toplofikatsia (Central Heating Company) had sent a bill for BGN500 which he should pay. Later it turned out that there were unpaid bills for the flat for over a year and the landlady had tried to fool him. Thus he left and the landlady kept the advance payment amounting to a month's rent. At present Bakri is pleased with the landlords and the flat he rents in Mladost. Raha (female, age 49) has rented a three-room unfurnished flat in the Tolstoy neighborhood because *“I had problems with the landlords of furnished flats in the past”*. Numa (female, age 35) describes her home in the Ovcha Kupel

neighborhood as “*A separate three-room flat, nice*”. The flat was semi-furnished and they procured the “*necessary things*”. Numa lives there with her husband and their two children.

Home owners – exceptions rather than a rule

Considering the current high prices on the real estate market, an individual with recognised status buying a home seems an unrealistic scenario. Nevertheless, in the course of recruitment of respondents, such cases were identified as well. These, however, should be discussed in the context which has allowed a foreigner (regardless of his/her status) to grow from a tenant into an owner. Procuring one’s own home is usually connected with certain personal biography specifics. For example, in the case of an asylum-seeker from Armenia, this is his cohabitation with a Bulgarian national. He has a good standard of living and no problems with his housing. What makes this case stand out is that the individual has taken a non-typical trajectory, which included integration despite the formal difficulties and absence of status, which is a unique course of action. He first integrated (*cohabitation with a Bulgarian national, a child, good job, own housing*) and is now waiting for the solution to the legal problems associated with status recognition and issuance of documents. However, this trajectory cannot be attributed only to an individual’s personal choice because it is also influenced by other key factors including an excellent command of Bulgarian and employment in a generally well-paying sector like construction. This automatically puts him in the group of those who integrate easily. *Although the respondent does not explicitly mention the sequence of events as cohabitation with a Bulgarian woman, finding a job, buying a home, it may well be that the cohabitation with a Bulgarian woman was the “entry” to good housing conditions, meaning that it was not him that bought the home.*

A family that has bought the house they are living in, relying only on their income, stands out among our respondents. This is a one-floor house which is relatively small for a family of six, but the owners plan to build additional rooms and enlarge their home, *relying again on their own funds only*. It has to be noted for this case that the house and the adjacent land are in a region where real estate prices are significantly lower, *compared to Sofia, for example*, which makes the purchase of a home a more realistic scenario. But this is also a region of high unemployment and for this family the procuring

of steady and regular income involves high flexibility, doing different types of work and acquiring command of the language quickly. It concerns a family which has been in Bulgaria for almost four years at the time of writing. In their country of origin, the wife was a primary school teacher and the husband was a doctor. Having come to Bulgaria, they spent five months in RRC Banya and were then granted status. At first they lived in Nova Zagora in a rented home, the only income coming from the husband who found a job in the local TPP. His command of English helped him find a job, and, in fact, a home, for the first integration steps they took on their own. He took the lead and his wife looked after the children, meaning that they relied on one salary only. They are an excellent example of targeted and good housing planning, but are the exception rather than the norm.

Methods of searching for housing

Only one of the respondents we talked to said he had found his home from an announcement. This is an individual who has been in the country for some 18 years and, naturally, being able to read notices is explainable, given the experience gained during previous changes of housing. All other respondents mentioned personal contacts, friends or the refugee community as the main channels of more secure ways of looking for a home. Their aim is to minimize the attempted fraud by landlords, but this cannot give complete security to home seekers. Most notable is the complete absence of the SAR in assisting the refugees in finding a home. The lack of policy for assistance in finding accommodation for refugees after they leave the homes of SAR places the refugees in a very unfavorable situation and makes them easy victims of fraud and deceitful attitudes on the part of landlords.

2.3.3. Homelessness – lack of initial stage of integration

The worst possible scenario for asylum-seekers and even for individuals with international protection in Bulgaria is to remain without shelter and without any steady financial support. Whether temporary, or the only option of asylum-seekers, this marginal situation is unacceptable and threatens the survival of asylum-seekers and refugees. Therefore, it is vital to understand what leads to homelessness, what kind of people are most threatened by this risk and what improvements can be introduced in the government policy in order to prevent such situations.

Survival in the context of homelessness

An important element in the analysis of homelessness among refugees is to establish the conditions they live in and how they cope with this situation. Thus, in the conversations with homeless refugees, the team focused on the basic living conditions, in particular how exactly the absence of such is compensated for. Indicative also is their choice of a place for shelter. They prefer the region around SAR where they not only can communicate with their compatriots but also have bigger chance to get help and assistance, be it only occasionally. Agisul (male, age 25) says he lives in the region around Kaufland Supermarket in the Ovcha Kupel neighborhood. He sleeps in a shed he has made himself of cartons and rags. Saad (male, age 31) spends the night in an abandoned building in front of SAR. At different times various men of different nationalities spend the night in abandoned buildings in the region of SAR. The walls of one such abandoned building called hotel "Ritz" are covered with poetic graffiti in Farsi:

"I have never expected that I will live in a place like this but that is not a problem. The problem is that I am in love with a girl and that girl is Iraqi"

and

"Like a nightingale in a cage, I remember the grass of my birthplace, wherever I live now ..."

The talks with the other refugees outlined a clear trend of relying on compatriots and friends from the refugee community. This is particularly obvious regarding ensuring elementary hygiene – access to bathroom and toilet. The individuals say that they only occasionally manage to have a bath at friends' homes. They further say that sometimes they are allowed to have a bath in SAR but *it is not explained under what particular circumstances they are allowed to use the sanitary facilities*. A similar trend is also observed in respect to the provision of sustenance for the homeless. Most of them depend on the help of their compatriots and friends who are still in SAR, as well as of others who already live in their own rented homes. Donations by NGOs like BRC are another source of clothes and food, but these food packages are not delivered on a regular basis and one cannot rely on them alone. In general, homeless refugees eat irregularly and their nutrition is of low quality.

The path to a life walking the streets

While the interviewed refugees describe similar methods of coping with the situation of homelessness, they are not a homogenous mass and the path to their current situation cannot be described by a single "trajectory". Therefore, the different typological cases need to be outlined.

Homelessness among asylum-seekers

The first group vulnerable to homelessness is that of asylum-seekers. Typical for the representatives of this group is the poor command of Bulgarian and English. Only some of them speak both languages, and not very well at that. This is due to the fact that none has attended Bulgarian language training courses or the vocational training courses at SAR. This is a direct result of their detention at SCTAF wherefrom they were released because they declared an opportunity for accommodation at an external address.

In many cases the address declared is fictitious, leading directly to the individual's homelessness. In other cases it turns out that at the time of release of the foreigner, an opportunity for accommodation at the address given no longer exists, or ceases to exist after some time, because of a change of circumstances. The address given is usually that of compatriots or other members of the

refugee community. Later, however, due to shortage of funds or emigration of the acquaintances they were accommodated with, these individuals live on the streets. At that point, they consider their decision a mistake and try to restore their right to accommodation in a home provided by SAR.

The emerging trajectory follows the following chronology:

Detention at SCTAF → release and going to an external address of one's own free will → temporary stay with acquaintances in a rented home → lack of funds → homelessness → wishing for new accommodation by SAR

Onward Movers

These are recognised refugees who have attempted emigration to Western Europe, failing to integrate and find a permanent job and a home. A motive for their attempted emigration could be their inability to settle in Bulgaria after status recognition, mostly due to their poor command of Bulgarian which makes it difficult to find a job. As a consequence of their unsuccessful emigration they are forced to return to Bulgaria, relying mainly on the help of acquaintances. Here they are faced with the impossibility of finding a job, and remain without income and accordingly, without housing. Their trajectory is the following:

Detention at SCTAF → accommodation in RRC → status recognition (without going through the Integration Programme of SAR) → temporary stay with compatriots /relatives and attempted establishment in Bulgaria → emigration to a West European country → return to Bulgaria, staying with acquaintances again → homelessness.

This pathway is clearly visible in the story of a young Iraqi who was granted humanitarian status in 2009. He was previously accommodated in RRC Banya. Thereafter he lived for one or two months in Nova Zagora and later went to acquaintances in Great Britain for about a year-and-a-half. He returned to Bulgaria in September of 2011 because he lost his job and income in Great Britain. He lived for a while with acquaintances in Sliven and later came to Sofia, to live with a Kurd he knew. Soon after, his acquaintance went to Western Europe and the young Iraqi became homeless.

A peculiar manifestation of this model are the cases of beneficiaries of international protection who, having emigrated from Bulgaria, are forced to return due to legal requirements, find themselves without funds to return to the country of their current residence and consequently have to live on the streets in Bulgaria. In such cases, respondents are not looking for a permanent job or housing in Bulgaria, but are in need of lump-sum assistance and temporary accommodation. Dani narrates: *"We returned to [a neighboring country of the country of origin], I found a temporary job there and a second child was born to me, with a disability. I applied to the Bulgarian embassy [in the country] to register my second child but they told me that I have to register the child in Bulgaria. I came back to Bulgaria and initiated the procedure for my baby and for the renewal of my identity card. I was not informed about the higher fees and so I remained without money, without a job, walking the streets while my wife is waiting in [the country] alone with 2 children"*.

Partly Integrated

Another pathway to homelessness is due to the incomplete process of integration. Persons granted status explicitly state their wish to remain in Bulgaria and find a job but due to their poor command of Bulgarian they fail to adapt and remain jobless and accordingly, homeless. They attribute their current situation to the inadequate duration of the integration programme. It is typical for these individuals to nevertheless manage to find temporary jobs but do not have steady permanent income and thus cannot afford to pay rent. Tarik (male, age 23) says that with a longer integration programme he could achieve a better command of the language and therefore procure the funds for his subsistence after humanitarian status recognition. In the current situation, having completed the programme and not receiving further financial assistance, he can no longer afford to pay for his rented home. He stayed with friends, but having no money, he often walks the streets. He works occasionally at construction sites or car washes, but he does not have permanent income.

2.4. Subsistence and social assistance

2.4.1. Subsistence means

The lack of subsistence means and/or a job is the main reason for homelessness among asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. Three main categories of individuals with different subsistence means can be identified among asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection:

Asylum-seekers in a status recognition procedure for less than one year

Asylum-seekers who are in a status recognition procedure for less than one year do not have the right to work and rely on the state assistance of BGN 65 per month per person and/or on funds sent by their family or relatives abroad. Respondents who rely on the state assistance of BGN65 per month only say that these funds are not sufficient. They want to be allowed to work or for the amount to be increased. Every month, they try to procure the cheapest food from the foreign supermarkets or the open air marketplaces in Sofia. Behram (male, age 31) says that in order to save money for food they do not buy bus tickets: *“Sometimes we are caught by the controller, sometimes we manage to run away”*. The situation of this category of foreigners gets even more difficult when additional costs arise. There is a newborn child in Bahtawar’s family and they need diapers and special food. They say they even had to resort to available materials like cloths for diapers, when they had no more money. Thanks to a social mediator from BRC they were granted a lump sum assistance of BGN 150 for the additional costs for the child. Soon after his arrival, his brother sent him money a couple of times. Now, when he is really short of money, and this happens every month around the 15th – 20th, he borrows from the other individuals from his country of origin and then gives the money back at the beginning of the next month.

Asylum-seekers having the right to work

Few of the asylum-seekers have been in the RSD procedure for more than a year and who have the right to work, manage to find a job which in any case, would most likely be a low-qualified,

temporary, hard physical job, mainly in the construction sector, as a stevedore, or in restaurants. The main obstacles to finding a job appear to be the poor command of the language, the absence of documents, and limited awareness about the opportunities for finding a job. Asylum-seekers rely mainly on their contacts among the foreign communities they come from and this is a problem for those of them that do not have such community. As one asylum-seeker stated, *“I’m looking for jobs around the Women’s Market and Ilientsi Goods Market, but all of my attempts fail”*.

In rare cases asylum-seekers having the right to work are employed under an employment contract. Most of them work without a contract and this makes them very vulnerable. Many of them complain of being victims of fraud and exploitation. They are not paid at all or are given half the agreed pay. Latif says: *“I work in a restaurant on the other side of the city. I travel a long distance. Sometimes I work 22 hours and then take a leave. I get half the pay due. I am happy because nevertheless I have a job”*. Behram explains: *“Now I have the right to work but I cannot find a job. I work one week and then I am not paid (no contract) or get half the agreed pay”*.

Financial assistance from abroad is a critical factor of survival and prevention of the risk of homelessness faced by the respondents who have filed multiple asylum applications.

Foreigners with humanitarian or refugee status

Most of the beneficiaries of international protection report that due to the continuing economic crisis and the weak labour market, they hardly manage to find a job. At the time of the interviews few of them or of the members of their families had work. Foreigners with humanitarian or refugee status work in jobs they are overqualified for; for example, an ex-policeman now works in a restaurant; a former car mechanic is now a stevedore. The reasons are that most of those who have been granted status recently have poor command of the language, they lack documents, there is no demand for the professions they received requalification in at SAR’s Integration Centre. This is how Anahid explains the situation of her family: *“Only my son works now. My daughter and I are looking for jobs but to no effect. Some time ago I worked in the kitchen of a restaurant. My daughter completed the cosmetics courses at the SAR Integration Centre but cannot find a job”*.

Some of the respondents report that they have found jobs through the project of the BRC “Development and implementation of a social mediation mechanism for access to social services of asylum-seekers, recognised refugees and individuals with humanitarian status with special needs”. At the time of the interviews they work under contracts as social mediators providing social mediation to vulnerable foreigners seeking protection and to individuals whose refugee or humanitarian status holders in the first 12 months after status recognition.⁴¹ One of the respondents reports that she assists the inhabitants of the centre in presenting their complaints and requests to the centre’s staff and management. She works toward improvement of the living conditions – for example, in the provision and distribution of donations. None of the respondents reports direct discrimination by potential employers as an obstacle to finding a job. Most of the foreigners whose status has been recognised and who have been in the country for a long time, work under employment contracts.

Many of the individuals in this category also rely on funds from abroad. Bakri reports that he relies for subsistence only on the money he is sent by his family, which is EUR 500 per month. He says he will be looking for a job abroad. It is noteworthy that only one respondent of all interviewed beneficiaries of international protection reports having started his own business. In some cases the asylum-seeking respondents state a wish to start their own business but say that it is related to their eventual status recognition in Bulgaria and is a factor of secondary importance at the moment. The lack of business initiative among the respondents may be attributable to the absence of specialized training on starting a business as well as to the lack of knowledge about micro-lending schemes.

The interviews carried out call for the conclusion that respondents are paid between BGN 200 and 1,000 per month, whether under a contract or not. Those under temporary employment are paid between BGN 15 and 30 per day.

⁴¹ For more information on the project, see http://www.redcross.bg/projects/refugees_project.html.

2.4.2. Social support

Situation of homeless foreigners

The interviewed homeless respondents seeking asylum or with international protection assess their situation as extremely difficult. They are not able to maintain minimum personal hygiene and suffer from malnutrition. Their situation is further aggravated by the fact that winter is coming and they cannot afford any shelter. One of the respondents has only one blanket which he takes with himself wherever he goes in order to have something to keep him warm during the night.

Besides having health problems and feeling physically unwell, the respondents are also in a very bad emotional condition. Most of them have lost any hope of improving their situation because they have almost no funds to get on their feet. One of the interviewed men said that in his despair he was even ready to go back to Iraq, whether death awaited him there or not, so that he did not live on the streets any more. Another respondent with humanitarian status reports that he has nowhere to get help from – his father who was his only close relative died in Iraq a month ago. He is making every effort to find a job, going about to the Arab employers in the region of the Women’s Market, Central Railway Station and Ilientsi Goods Market, but to no effect.

Social support of homeless foreigners

Homeless foreigners mainly rely on assistance from acquaintances within their communities and from NGOs. From the Refugee-Migrant Service of BRC they get financial assistance for shelter and medicine, as well as food packages containing pulse, canned food, cooking oil, sugar and tea. With the money for shelter, respondents take temporary accommodation at a hostel, a cheap hotel (in the vicinity of the Central Railway Station) or they rent a room in a flat. This NGO also assists homeless refugees seeking asylum who have been released from SCTAF on account of giving an external address in filing a new application for accommodation at RRC Sofia. The homeless individuals mainly apply to the Council of Refugee Women for clothes which the NGO collects through donation campaigns, as well as for counsel and support.

The homeless individuals report that they cannot rely on state support to improve their condition. The interviewed homeless foreigners say they do not understand why RRC Sofia does not accept them once they are asylum-seekers. They realise they have made a mistake going to an external address but nevertheless they think that from a humane perspective it is inappropriate to leave them walking the streets.

Another respondent who was accommodated at RRC Sofia was granted humanitarian status and was included in NPIR where he attended courses in the Bulgarian language and sewing for a period of six to seven months. At that time he received his rental money through the programme. He reports that having completed the programme, he could no longer afford to pay his rent. He started living with friends, but having no money to pay rent, he lives on the streets more and more often. He works occasionally at construction sites or at a car wash.

Health problems, both personal and of family members, are reported by asylum-seekers and foreigners with international protection, regardless of their housing. The problems of the respondents accommodated at SAR's RRC are connected mainly with the lack of awareness of their health rights and the opportunities for state assistance. Bahtawar reports having a lot of problems in the period when his child was born because he had to manage alone in the hospital, without an interpreter, and paid for the treatment himself. He did not know what documents were required for the costs to be covered by his insurance. He says now he knows better and is less worried should he need any medical care. Arman reports he is worried about the health of his mother. He says she is very ill and the stay in the prison in Svilengrad aggravated her condition. He is worried that he alone has to pay for her treatment and take care of her. He states that so far he has not been granted any financial assistance for her treatment either from SAR or another organisation.

The lack of sufficient **funds to buy medicines** emerges as a problem for both asylum-seekers and foreigners with international protection. An interviewed foreigner reports he has problems paying for the medicine necessary for the ill family members (his wife has diabetes and one of his sons has blood pressure problems). He paid out of his pocket and now he is hoping for BRC to reimburse him. Anahid's family, who has lived for a long time in Bulgaria, report the same problem. At present three of the four adults do not have

jobs but they need medicine for her seriously ill husband. Yet BRC refuses to grant them funds to buy medicine. Another respondent says BRC gives priority for support to families with small children and he was told that he would have to wait for his heart medication.

Some of the interviewed foreigners with housing report **bureaucracy problems and lack of understanding on the part of the central and local administration**. A family whose members have international protection would like to apply for municipal housing but the municipal officials have told them that they need to have resided at the same address for more than 10 years. In practice, this requirement makes it impossible for foreigners to apply because, for shortage of funds, the family often had to move. According to the law they have to renew their identity cards but they have no funds for that. Thus they cannot benefit from social assistance for heating, granted annually by the SAD of the municipality in their place of residence. This assistance is granted at a permanent address; officials from the Directorate come and draw up a social report. But as they often move, their new address is different from the permanent one and thus they cannot benefit from this opportunity. They say it is very difficult for foreigners to get any information from the municipality, for example about social assistance or social services for foreigners. In their opinion, the officials are not competent or refuse to provide information. A municipal official said frankly to Anahid: "As you have no job here, go back to Armenia"! Adam says he does not understand why after he has won his case in court, SAR does not comply with the court decision in his favor repealing SAR's decision.

Social support for foreigners with housing

Apart from the NGOs, which are the main supporters of homeless foreigners (BRC, Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria), church organisations like the Catholic Church and Prelom Christian Centre also provide social support to foreigners. BRC supports foreigners accommodated at RRC of SAR with food packages, pharmaceuticals and lump-sum financial assistance; for example, they granted assistance of BGN 60 to Bahtawar after the birth of his child. The foreigners interviewed report that church organisations assist them in finding jobs and homes to rent, procuring food, shelter, finding a lawyer, as well as financial support. They also provide an external address to asylum-seekers who are detained in SCTAF and are awaiting release by SAR.

In addition to the social mediators within the BRC project, Prelom Christian Centre also assists foreigners with bureaucracy problems. Anahid reports she had big problems with getting included in the Personal Assistant Programme for her disabled husband. After repeated refusals and months of efforts she managed to become included and to receive BGN 80-90 per month. A representative of the church organisation assisted the family in completing the documents for the programme, in procuring OEMB assistance for the disabled husband, and accompanying them at the meetings with the SAD.

2.5. Integration policies

The following problem areas of the integration policies can be outlined on the basis of the interviews with foreigners seeking protection and with recognised status conducted within the research. This section of the research presents the answers of homeless individuals and foreigners with housing. On the whole, the respondents positively assess the integration measures implemented by the Bulgarian State, but report that further efforts are needed in certain areas. Behram comments on the demographic situation and the integration of refugees: “Most countries have generation problems and make use of the people from other nations living there. If measures to integrate them are not taken, if they have no money, no job, they will start doing bad things like human trafficking, for example”.

Housing

Respondents comment that housing should be provided for a longer period. This can be achieved by increasing the period of rental compensation for beneficiaries of international protection. Umair (male, age 27) reports problems with the absence of mechanisms in support of foreigners who have fallen into poverty.

Financial support

Inadequate financial assistance is also reported as a problem area by the respondents. Bakri (who subsists on money sent by his family), for example, says: “The money refugees get in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands are enough for them to live well. In Bulgaria they are not enough for anything”.

Labour market access

The interviewed foreigners comment that more vocational training courses and more support for finding a job are needed. Finding a job is a major factor in the decision to settle in Bulgaria. Permanently unemployed respondents say they would go abroad and do not want to settle in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian language training

On the whole, the Bulgarian language training courses are positively assessed by the foreigners interviewed. Reported drawbacks include inadequate course length and absence of language training levels. There is one textbook for all, adults and children, regardless of the level of their progress. A homeless respondent believes that had the programme been a little longer he would have mastered the language better and gotten on his feet. According to Murad, the group being too large is also a problem - 15-20 people study Bulgarian in a very small room. Asylum-seeking foreigners report the limited access to Bulgarian language training courses is a problem. Respondents comment that they want to learn the Bulgarian language but as there are no vacancies, they have to wait. The Integration Centre of SAR reports that this problem is partially due to the fact that some course participants leave or stop going, but the Agency does not have clear statistics of drop-outs and the effect cannot be adequately assessed.

Applying for Bulgarian citizenship

The interviewed homeless foreigners set as a priority the improvement of their situation and do not think long-term. Being homeless, they do not even think of their status, but only of how to get out of their dire situation. They intend to settle where they find a job and can afford to lead a decent life. Most of the respondents who have accommodation share that they would like to remain in the country and to apply for Bulgarian citizenship at some point. The main drivers for wanting to settle in Bulgaria are that they like the country – “I like Bulgaria. Green Bulgaria”, and that some already have family and friends here, and know Bulgarian.

3. Terminology

The following working terms have been used in the research:

Foreigner seeking protection is an individual who has expressed before a state body his wish to be granted special protection under the LAR until completion of the application examining procedure.⁴²

The Bulgarian State grants four types of special protection – asylum, refugee status, humanitarian status and temporary protection.

Asylum is the protection granted by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria to foreigners persecuted for reasons of their convictions or activity in advocating internationally recognised rights and freedoms (Article 7 of the LAR).

Temporary protection, introduced with a resolution of the Council of the European Union, is granted by the CoM for a specific period of time in the event of a mass influx of foreigners who are forced to leave their country of origin or residence as a result of an armed conflict, civil war, foreign aggression, large-scale violations of human rights or violence in the territory of the relevant country or in a specific area thereof and who, for those reasons, cannot return there. (Article 11 of the LAR).

Refugee status is granted by the Chairperson of SAR to any foreigner satisfying the criteria laid down in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Geneva Convention) and in the LAR. In the Republic of Bulgaria, refugee status is granted to any foreigner who has a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion and/or belief, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or return to it. (Article 8 (1) of the LAR).



A homeless asylum-seeker from Iran sits on a makeshift bed located in an abandoned building nearby a refugee reception centre in Sofia, Bulgaria.
© UNHCR/B. Szandelszky/2010

Humanitarian status is granted by the Chairperson of SAR to any foreigner forced to leave or stay outside his/her country of origin for reasons of facing a threat of grave violation such as death penalty or execution, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or serious personal threat to his life or personality as a civilian due to violence in cases of national or international armed conflict (Article 9 (1) of the LAR).

⁴² Section 1., Item 2, Additional Provisions, LAR.

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5. Annex

Questionnaire for an interview with an asylum-seeker / refugee

INFORMATION SECTION:

Gender: male female

Family status: single family with children
 family without children single parent with children
 other.....

Country of origin:
.....

Mother tongue: Arab Farsi Kurdish Pushtu
 Other.....

Legal status: refugee asylum-seeker humanitarian
status

Age:.....

How long have you been living in Bulgaria?

Months Years

Religion:

Level of command of Bulgarian language:

- Don't understand
- Understand familiar words and most basic phrases
- Understand simple sentences and communications
- Understand most of the news on TV
- No problems with understanding

Level of command of English language:

- Don't understand
- Understand familiar words and most basic phrases
- Understand simple sentences and communications
- Understand most of the news on TV
- No problems with understanding

Forms of housing or homelessness

(please specify the housing or homelessness condition of the
respondent, more than 1 answer possible)

.....
.....

FOR ASYLUM-SEEKER:

If homeless, please specify why and where he lives (examples):

- Detained at SCTAF, signed declaration for accommodation at
(false/currently non-existent) external address;
- Filed 2nd – 3rd refugee status application and not eligible any
more for state support;
- Lives in the park;
- Lives in an abandoned house;
- Other, please specify:

.....

If the asylum-seeker has housing, please specify type (examples):

- In a home of the State Agency for Refugees;
- At an external address;
- Other, please specify:

.....

FOR A PERSON WITH REFUGEE STATUS:

If homeless, please specify why and where he lives (examples):

- Lives in the park
- Lives in a dilapidated house
- Other, please specify:

.....

If the refugee has housing, please specify type (examples):

- Private house;
- Separate flat;
- Shares a flat/room (please specify who pays, whom he lives with, how are things organised)

.....

- In the home of the State Agency for Refugees;
- Social homes;
- Accommodation with/through religious communities;
- Other, please specify

.....

If the respondent has a place to live:

1. Tell me where do you live now?

.....
.....
.....

2. How did you find your housing?

- From a notice;
- Through an acquaintance/friend/compatriot;
- Through the State Agency for Refugees;
- Through a church/religious community;
- Through a non-governmental organisation (for example, BRC)
- Other, please specify:

.....

3. Did you have problems with the housing at some point?

- Yes;
- No.

4. If yes, why? (For example: I got a refusal from SAR and I had to leave the home at a very short notice; I have recognised status but I have no job/money; or I filed at SCTAF a declaration for an external address in order to be released but I actually had no place to live)

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.....

5. What conditions do you live in?

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.....
.....

6. What do you do for a living?

(What is your job? What are you engaged in?)

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7. What contract do you have?

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8. What is your net pay? (per month, per day, per week)

.....

9. How do you feel now/how do you describe your present situation?

.....
.....
.....

10. Do you have any (other) problems? If yes, what?

.....
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.....

11. What assistance (financial, social assistance, support) do you receive from the State?

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.....

12. What assistance (financial, social assistance, support) do you receive from NGOs?

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13. Do you think that the integration programme of SAR is useful/what is your assessment of it?

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.....

14. Do you think that the Bulgarian refugee integration policy is useful/what is your assessment of it? What needs to be changed?

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15. Would you remain in Bulgaria or would you like to immigrate in the EU?

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16. Would you apply for Bulgarian citizenship in a couple of years?

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17. If not, why?

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18. How did you decide to come to Bulgaria?

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.....

19. How did you enter Bulgaria, where from?

.....
.....
.....

20. How and when did you file a refugee application?

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.....
.....
.....

21. How did/is the status recognition procedure go/going? How long did you wait/have you been waiting for a decision?

.....
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.....
.....

If the respondent is homeless:

1. How did it come to be that you are homeless? Please specify.

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.....

2. Please tell me where and how you spend the night?

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.....

3. Where do you use bathroom/toilet?

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.....

4. Where do you eat?

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.....
.....

5. Did you apply for support to the State/NGO/acquaintances?

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.....
.....

6. How do you feel now/how do you describe your present situation?

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.....

7. Do you have any (other) problems? If yes, what?

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8. What assistance (financial, social assistance, support) do you receive from the State?

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9. What assistance (financial, social assistance, support) do you receive from NGOs?

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10. Do you think that the integration programme of SAR is useful/what is your assessment of it?

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14. If not, why?

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15. How did you decide to come to Bulgaria?

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16. How did you enter Bulgaria? Where from?

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17. When and how did you file a refugee application?

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**18. How did/is the status recognition procedure go/going?
How long did you wait/have you been waiting?**

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