

OBORISHTE SAT

POLICY FOR
PROMOTING
INTEGRATION AND
SOCIAL
INCLUSION
AT LOCAL LEVEL

1. Purpose of the document

The current integration policy is a document developed by the association "Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria", the Self-Advocacy Team and Oborishte Municipality. The document aims to define the steps for integration and their practical implementation at a local level, focusing on persons seeking international protection and migrants. The forewritten is based on the understanding that integration is an investment that enables newcomers to join the economic, social and cultural life of the country as soon as possible and thus be able to take care of themselves, their loved ones and benefit the host society. Another fundamental view is that the government and local authorities have a leading role in the integration of persons with international protection, and the non-governmental sector has supporting and complementary functions.

The integration of refugees at the local level is of key importance on one hand for ensuring a good social, health and educational environment for those granted international protection and on the other for the development and improvement of the environment of the host municipality. The Plan for the Integration of Refugees and Migrants in the European Union 2021-2027 notes that "Integration and inclusion are key for people coming to Europe, for local communities and for the long-term well-being of our societies and the stability of our economies." It is also noted there: "The process of integration involves the host society, which should create opportunities for the full economic, social, cultural and political participation of immigrants. It also includes adaptation on the part of migrants, each of whom has rights and responsibilities in relation to their new country of residence." In the same document, it is clearly noted that a significant part of the labor resource at the level of the European Union comes from third-country nationals who arrived as migrants or refugees on the territory of the Union.

Among the important factors for integration identified at the European level are the provision of education, language training, health care, access to the labor market and recognition of professional qualifications, provision of housing, etc. In Bulgaria, the main normative act that addresses integration is the Ordinance on the terms and conditions for concluding, implementing and terminating an agreement on the integration of foreigners granted asylum or international protection. The document addresses the process of carrying out integration at the local level, based on the conclusion of an integration agreement with the municipality, by place of residence.

The process of integration means the opportunity for newcomers to be included as equals in the economic, social and cultural life of the country as soon as possible and thus be able to take care of themselves, their loved ones and be of

benefit to the host society.

The process of integration is a continuous, dynamic, multifaceted and two-way process, requiring the efforts of all stakeholders: the willingness of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to give up their cultural identity, and the willingness of the local community and state institutions to accept refugees as equals.

The main objectives of the integration policies are:

- Creating security (freedom of choice, freedom of movement);
- Achieving an autonomous life (access to information, education, healthcare, social services);
- Preserved cultural and religious values of the refugees while respecting the values of the host country;
- Equal participation in public, social, cultural and economic life;
- Provision of opportunities and prospects for realization;

Another fundamental view is the leading role of institutions, government and local authorities, supported by the non-governmental sector and civil society organizations to complement supporting services. This necessitates the creation of a mechanism of interaction with non-governmental organizations.

The process of integration should be based on the principles laid down in European policies and legislation for the integration of third country nationals - migrants and refugees.

First and foremost, this is the principle of equal opportunities, inclusion, as well as participation in discussions and decision-making about their present and future.

The European Union and national legislation, in particular the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, prohibit the application of discriminatory practices based on ethnic and national affiliation, religion, political beliefs, gender and sexual orientation. The implementation of inclusive policies should not create opportunities for discrimination, respecting the rights and needs of other parties in the process, including refugees and migrants themselves. The implementation of policies should take place after adaptation and transformation to the needs of a heterogeneous society, taking into account the specific challenges and needs of different groups. Measures taken to support the integration of migrants and refugees must not violate the rights to support other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups or minorities. Moreover, policies should create opportunities for

inclusion and equality. The current policy for the development of integration at the local level aims precisely at creating opportunities for inclusion and integration creating equal opportunities and non-discrimination.

The second factor that should be addressed is **targeted support according to specific needs**. The Ordinance of the Council of Ministers in connection with the conclusion of integration agreements addresses the need to provide systematic support for integration by obtaining the status of international protection, addressing the specific vulnerability of those granted international protection, who often find it difficult to find housing, do not have sufficient language skills and difficult can join the labor market. For this reason, it is necessary to provide additional support with the aim of successful adaptation and integration in this initial phase. The state envisions that this support should be provided at the local level and provided through specific services at the municipal level, such as providing support for enrollment in an educational institution, support for accessing social and health services, and enrollment at the local employment office.

In this context, the need to **distinguish between different phases of adaptation and integration of refugees and migrants** arriving in the country should be addressed and the support provided should be tailored to the particularities and needs, which are specific to the exact phase of the integration process.

Providing integrative support based on the principle of gender equality recognizing specific vulnerable groups at risk of discrimination.

European integration practice recognizes gender and age, as well as representatives of vulnerable minorities based on language, religion and sexual orientation, as an important factor to be taken into account when planning and providing support. A lot of data shows that women are at a much greater risk of being discriminated against and prevented from accessing health care, education and adequate recognition of their work skills and the labor market. In Bulgaria, there is a law on gender equality that specifically addresses this problem and defines specific measures to prevent this risk. Largely due to cultural and social specificities and the lack of a supportive environment, women should be subject to specific measures to ensure equality.

2. The following definitions are adopted in this policy:

The Law on Protection against Discrimination defines discrimination as unequal, less favorable treatment of a person based on the marks indicated under Art. 4, Para. 1 of the CPA.

Art. 4. (1) (Amend. – OG, issue No. 70 from 2004, enforced since 01.01.2005) Any direct or indirect discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship, origin, religion or belief, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or social status, disability, age, sexual orientation, marital status, property status or any other signs established by law or in an international treaty, according to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party.

(2) Direct discrimination is any less favorable treatment of a person based on the signs under para. 1 than another person is treated, has been treated or would be treated under comparable similar circumstances.

(3) (Amend. – OG, issue No. 105 from 2016) Indirect discrimination is the placement of a person or persons who bear a sign under Art. 4, para. 1, or to persons who, without being the bearers of such a characteristic, together with the former suffer less favorable treatment or are placed in a particularly unfavorable situation resulting from an apparently neutral provision, criterion, or practice, unless the provision, criterion or practice are objectively justified in view of a legitimate aim and the means to achieve the aim are appropriate and necessary.

4. Law on Refugees and Asylum Art. 37a "Foreigners granted asylum or international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria are offered the conclusion of an integration agreement, which defines their rights and obligations, as well as the rights and obligations of the relevant state or municipal bodies".

5. Ordinance on the terms and conditions for concluding, implementing, and terminating the integration agreement for foreigners granted asylum or international protection, defines the key role of municipalities in the integration process, as concluding an integration agreement and assisting with integration services in the field of issuing of personal documents, housing, education, access to the labor market, healthcare and social assistance.

Decree No. 226 of the Council of Ministers dated 10.09.2019 of the Council of Ministers establishes a National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration with the Deputy Prime Minister as Chairperson and the power to "Coordinate the activities of state bodies, local self-government bodies and local administration, non-governmental and international organizations on the territory of the country in determining and implementing the policy in the field

of migration, borders, asylum and integration and in the implementation of the relevant strategic documents".

In view of the current circumstances, Sofia has for several years begun to assess the need for an approach to the integration of foreign citizens.

3. Scope of the policy:

This policy is being implemented with the aim of actively including refugees in the integration process, in the context of the European practices on the matter and the European Integration Program 2021-2027. A key factor is the creation of a model of interaction between representatives of refugee communities, non-governmental and international organizations that support the integration of refugees and municipal authorities to create better opportunities for interaction between refugees and the municipal administration and develop programs to support the good interaction between the local population and those granted international protection.

At the same time, the new group of citizens of Ukraine who received temporary protection should be addressed, who, despite not being mentioned in the Ordinance, are essentially refugees from a military conflict and should be able to benefit from social, health, labor and educational support under the same the order in which you received international protection.

The creation of a better interaction mechanism would build inclusive services and an opportunity to prevent risks such as dropping out of the education and labor system, social isolation, and the development of various risk factors, such as poor health care, poverty and the development of risky and criminal activities. At the same time, it will create better opportunities for labor and social integration, which will develop the labor market and cultural life. Such a policy is consistent with the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which reaffirm international commitments to recognize displaced persons as stakeholders (Harley and Hobbs 2020). Additionally, research in the field identifies how direct refugee participation is a factor in developing more relevant and effective interventions (Badran 2019, Jones 2019). Significantly, non-governmental and international organizations, researchers and institutions are following suit, making commitments, and taking strategic actions to expand the scope and depth of multi-sectoral refugee participation (United Nations 2019, Shivakoti and Milner, 2020, Kunzelman 2021).

4. Interaction mechanism:

The creation of an opportunity for representatives of the various refugee groups and non-governmental, international organizations involved in supporting integration to be present in working groups that directly affect the integration process and to have an advisory opinion that will help to develop projects and programs financed under various financial mechanisms noted in the Ordinance on the Conclusion of Integration Agreements. Inclusion of representatives of the refugee communities will help to develop better communication between the municipal authorities and these specific groups, as well as there will be an opportunity to address specific problems of the communities.

This will provide a better opportunity to assess problems among refugee communities, prevent situations of communication breakdown between authorities and communities, and effectively develop strategies to address these problems. Last but not least, this will enable coordinated and systematic actions of all participants in the process and the good use of the resources of the municipality and the non-governmental sector, so that most of the problematic situations are adequately addressed.

The recognition of non-governmental and international organizations as possible mediators between refugees with temporary and international protection and local government institutions to help strengthen and improve interaction with communities and improve interaction with them.

Among the key committees that should engage with this issue are:

- *Committee on Education, Culture, Science and Cultural Diversity;*
- *Civil Society Relations Committee;*
- *Committee on Health and Social Policy.*

The Global Refugee Network (GRF) in its report for 2023 defines as the main goals (I) increasing the participation of refugees in the formation of policies, (II) building the capacity of refugees to engage at local, national, regional and global level, (III) Strategic advocacy for and promotion of inclusive human rights approaches to forced displacement.

The 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) reaffirm an international commitment to recognize displaced persons as stakeholders (Harley and Hobbs 2020). In addition, scholars have identified how direct refugee involvement can empower refugees as well as lead to more relevant and effective interventions (Badran 2019, Jones 2019). Scholars also highlight the merits and tangible effects of refugee-led initiatives to provide social protection and material security (Alio et al 2020, Pincock et al

2020a). The exclusion of refugees and other forcibly displaced people matters because these governance processes have a significant impact on the daily lives of over 34 million displaced persons who are currently under UNHCR's protection mandate (UNHCR 2021a). These processes determine the rights of refugees and the distribution of materials they have access to, as well as the critically secure durable solutions that end their displacement (Arnold-Fernández 2019). Despite these high stakes, decision-makers have often viewed refugees as too vulnerable (Sigona 2014), unskilled, or otherwise unable to participate in decision-making (Barnett 2011, Tsion-Abebe 2021). In other words, refugee efforts – including those of the co-authors of this paper, who are participants in the self-advocacy group – are persistently driving the shift from exclusion to inclusion. It is significant that NGOs, researchers and research institutions are following suit, making commitments and taking strategic actions to expand the scope and depth of multi-sectoral participation of refugees (United Nations 2019, Shivakoti and Milner 2020, Kunzelman 2021).

Recognizing the challenges and opportunities, now is a good time for renewing global commitments to recognize, strengthen, expand and respect refugee efforts.

5. Procedure for interaction and cooperation:

The current policy is typical for Bulgaria and there are no established mechanisms for the engagement and participation of third country nationals in processes that directly affect them and in accordance with the requirements for non-discrimination laid down in European and national documents related to the participation of citizens in processes that directly affect them. Municipal authorities perceive the representatives of non-governmental organizations engaged in refugee issues and especially those with representatives from the refugee communities themselves, as well as formal and informal associations of refugees as having the right to vote in the process of developing policies or planning projects and programs for the provision of services to refugees.

The municipality recognizes its role as committed to providing support for integration listed in the ordinance of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria and, given the need for financing integration activities, will make active efforts to participate in projects financed by various financial mechanisms in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, with the aim creating an opportunity to finance projects under which the necessary services to support the integration of refugees will be provided. The decision-making process for participation in the projects will be consulted with representatives of refugees in

the form of non-governmental organizations and formal and informal refugee associations, with the aim of assessing needs and planning effective options for addressing them. At the same time, the projects will provide an opportunity to solve various important problems of the local government such as the renovation of abandoned buildings, the creation of new jobs and the creation of an inclusive cultural environment promoting diversity and tourism opportunities.

The municipality will interact with non-governmental organizations in the implementation of the projects it recognizes as key for the good integration of refugees and migrants living on its territory.

The municipality will undertake within the next three years to determine a person responsible for the coordination between the parties involved in refugee integration. Its functions will include liaising with non-governmental and informal refugee associations.

For the financing of integration measures, opportunities for financing activities will be explored and funds will be used from: European funds, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, operational programs under the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the Fund for European helping the people in most of need; The Norwegian Financial Mechanism and other funding from national and international programs.

Policy coordination and civil society engagement

Recommendations:

- Create a refugee integration coordination office in your city to better target civil society organizations and offer a centralized point of contact for all issues related to refugee policies;
- Have the refugee coordinator actively and regularly liaise with civil society and charities to improve the flow of information and coordinate the efforts of all organizations and city departments through regular meetings and through the creation of tools such as online databases and applications;
- Develop an online and offline network for volunteers and civil society organizations to create synergies as well as facilitate knowledge sharing and exchange of best practices;
- Use the expertise and creativity of citizens whenever possible.

Work

Recommendations for policy makers:

- Open the labor market to refugees as early as possible, ideally on arrival, including through internships and other schemes to connect refugees with

employers;

- Facilitate the recognition of refugee qualifications, including by establishing a dedicated office in the city to liaise with the national recognition authority and expedite the process;
- Create a network of companies, trade unions and chambers of commerce to offer employment opportunities to refugees;
- Provide language courses and offer support to stabilize the personal situation of refugees;
- Provide information and orientation in the job application phase, for example by organizing job application workshops;
- Approach local employers directly and connect them with refugees looking for work;



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