

Labor integration of refugees in a socio-economic perspective

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Abstract. As in most European countries, as in our country, migrants have lower employment rates. However, there are differences between different groups of migrants. Refugees, as a separate and more specific migrant group, are much less integrated in the labour market. Their concentration tends to be in larger cities and regions, which creates numerous challenges for local authorities and labour markets. On the other hand, tracking the work, benefits and effects of refugee integration can support a more systematic approach to studying their labour integration based on actual activities. Given this, the purpose of this report is to emphasize the labour integration of refugees in a socio-economic perspective with a focus on the benefits of the process in the territory of Sofia. Research methods include synthesis and analysis of various sources, as well as review of the work of organizations, institutions and structures involved in the process. The results represent efforts and progress in relation to the labour integration of refugees, through cooperation and building sustainable partnerships. The conclusions show that in this way, not only policies, measures and good practices can be created to serve for the more successful integration of refugees, but also to achieve benefits and effects for the cities with their higher concentration of economic and social point of view.

1 Introduction

It has been repeatedly established that labour market integration takes time [1-3]. Employment among new migrants and refugees for the EU as a whole is about 10% lower than among the native population [4]. In recent years, the large influx of refugees to EU countries, especially since the start of the war in Ukraine, has raised more questions and led to the need for more research on how best to improve migrants' labour market prospects [5]. Research shows that the initial conditions refugees face in host countries have an important and long-lasting impact on their future socio-economic integration [3].

The purpose of the report is to examine and analyse the labour integration of refugees in a socio-economic perspective, while also trying to put both the positives and the barriers through successful and effective integration. As a number of difficulties are encountered along this path, we focus on mutual cooperation between all interested parties, open

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dialogue, trust and support, so that the relationship between migration, integration, subsequent development and social inclusion of refugees can be constructive, positive and effective through joint efforts and shared responsibility.

The highlights of this report are mainly related to:

- How different communities and the labour market interact and what facilitates the integration of refugees or creates obstacles and barriers in this process.
- What shortcomings are observed in terms of negative attitudes as a barrier to the integration of migrants in our country.
- How do funds and material resources for refugees compete with those for other socially vulnerable groups.
- What are the social distances in relation to different migrant groups (with a focus on non-Europeans) compared to the reception of Ukrainian refugees.
- What results and rapid response in the integration of Ukrainian refugees have been observed since the beginning of the war; what is the actual activity carried out by agencies, institutions and organizations for the successful integration of those of them who choose to stay in Bulgaria.

The report advocates the claim that the successful integration of refugees into the labour market requires the efforts of all interested parties: management elite, non-governmental and civil organizations, society.

A very strong and significant factor in the processes of refugee integration are the public opinions and attitudes of the people in the host community. Locals can be more positive and accepting of refugees (not only from Ukraine, but in general) if they witness real actions and real work done in practice on issues related to their integration in our country.

Given all this, as well as the dynamics of the labour market, migration and refugee waves and the increasingly painful and challenging issues of social inclusion, options for earlier labour integration of people of foreign origin should be sought. Their recent inclusion and offering of support policies is potentially more beneficial, but it can also speed up the integration process and avoid social exclusion. Such approaches can contribute to economic growth, social cohesion, increasing trust in management, institutions, support organizations, avoiding the poverty trap. This can also lead to many indirect benefits such as mitigating differences between countries, avoiding conflicts and ethnic tensions, or the models created and implemented can be successfully adapted in other regions of the host countries, or can be in support of refugees not only from the conflict zones, but also those who intend to permanently settle and live in the host community.

2 Materials and methods

The research methods in this report include a synthesis and analysis of various sources, as well as an overview of the work of organizations, institutions and structures involved in the process. Data and studies have been reviewed that show the current state of problems related to the employment and integration of refugees in Bulgaria, as well as the negative effects of this on their social inclusion. Presented are the current attitudes of the people in Bulgarian society regarding the acceptance and integration of refugees. The social distances in the attitudes of Bulgarians towards migrants and refugees of different origins, as well as their readiness for inclusion and support, volunteering and participation in civil organizations and initiatives, were examined.

In support of the claim that the successful integration of refugees into the labour market requires the efforts of all interested parties, the work of agencies, institutions and related projects that contribute to the more successful labour and social inclusion of persons of foreign origin is presented and analysed. There is a focus on the application of approaches

for earlier integration and the avoidance of additional problems and challenges and an emphasis on the benefits of the process on the territory of Sofia, through the work, activity and specific results (direct and indirect) of the Capital Municipal Agency for Privatization and Investments (Invest Sofia).

3 Results

In recent years, Bulgaria has achieved results in the field of employment and social inclusion, but despite this, it still has one of the highest shares of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as high levels of income inequality. The review of various sources relevant to the problem shows that, at the community level, the risk factors of social exclusion are mostly associated with: poverty, discrimination, unemployment, poor governance, poor education, poor health care, violation of human rights, lack of housing and adequate services, lack of social protection policies [6]. Unfortunately, statistics reveal the strongest significant relationship (dependency) between poverty, social exclusion and employment, as well as between lack of integration and employment in the most at-risk groups. It also creates a number of vicious circles: lack of employment leads to poverty, which is a predictor of social exclusion. This, in turn, creates conditions for the deterioration of the mental health condition, which also leads to the deterioration of the general health status of people, which increases the mortality rate [7]. Environmental factors are also related to the mental health of people in Bulgaria, and those of greatest importance are again directly related to poverty: the degree of urbanization of the area, living conditions, availability / lack of access to drinking water and water in general, ethnic tension, unstable political situation [8]. The data on the leading indicators of social inclusion, as well as the results on the main social indicators in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), highlight some groups as particularly vulnerable. Along with the economically inactive, children, young people, the elderly and those with disabilities, the groups of persons of foreign origin (migrants, refugees) and persons of different ethnicities stand out [12].

For the group we focus on here, namely persons of foreign origin (migrants, refugees), a key factor in promoting social inclusion, prevention and the fight against poverty is providing access to education [8].

The data on the key indicators also show that precisely the unemployed and economically inactive persons are among the most at-risk groups for falling into poverty [6]. In this regard, providing suitable forms of employment for persons of foreign origin, increasing their qualifications and skills, is a leading prerequisite for their successful integration, both in the labour market and in the social life of the country.

The link between employment, people of foreign origin and their social inclusion stands out even more after the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine last year. Since then, more than 977,000 refugees have passed through Bulgaria by the end of December 2022 [9], with around 50,200 refugees from Ukraine remaining in the country at the moment and living mostly in the larger cities (mostly Sofia and Plovdiv) and in the coastal areas of the Black Sea.

As of 2023, further needs assessments, profiling and intention surveys of refugees from Ukraine continue as the most pressing issues they currently face in terms of labour integration are related to access to national systems, quality education and enhanced socio-economic inclusion, as well as support for integration into the labour market, but in communication with communities about available services and state support, a significant gap has been identified [10]. However, the need to improve communication with the refugee community and access to information about available services (health, education,

employment and social services) is set as a top priority, noting that the promotion of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities also remains an important priority in response to interventions to ensure long-term social stability of refugees in Bulgaria [10].

Given the weaker integration of refugees in the labour market, we can look at it from the perspective of migrants and refugees. In the first perspective, according to studies, it is important to emphasize that most migrants in Bulgaria are self-employed and have their own business, and another positive feature is that more Bulgarians work in migrant companies than vice versa (migrants in Bulgarian companies). Most ethnic niches in our country (Chinese, Lebanese, Indians, Arabs) have restaurants, engage in trade or small businesses, providing employment to many refugees and migrants. The Russian migrant community is diverse, working in the private sector, but also in administration, media, education. EU citizens work as specialists, experts and managers in the subsidiary companies of their countries of origin that invest in Bulgaria, but also as advisers to various organizations and institutions. The smallest in our country is the African community, mainly employed in call centres, where mastery of French and English is highly valued [11]. In the second perspective, it is observed that the number of persons with refugee status who work on employment contracts is small, but it is reported that there are actually more: about 60 % of the searchers asylum and refugees they work without contract, which reinforces their vulnerability [12]. It stands out two trends: one group of refugees prefer Yes they work according to qualifications and experience si, but druga significant group show big desire Yes everything include in activities, characteristic for Bulgarian labour market (e.g. translational services to non-governmental organizations working with refugees, in call centres or in production [12].

Looking at the perspective of social and cultural capital, it can be said that large cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, etc., are the most common attraction for migrant groups. They have the strongest intercultural appearance precisely in the larger administrative centres in our country. In Sofia, there are several emblematic places where migrant communities are most visible: Iliyantsi market, Women's market, the mosque. Migrant groups also have an active social and cultural life: Russians have their Russian cultural and informational centre in the centre of Sofia, Arabic them communities have their own associations (Palestinian, Syrian), and among the refugees most organized are the women with own an association that is rich and diverse activity [13]. This shows that representatives of both communities (migrant and refugee) actively cooperate and contribute a lot to the integration of refugees in Bulgaria. Research indicates that in the years before the 1989 changes, Bulgaria had very little experience with migration and no experience with democratic politics on integration issues, yet the country had high levels of integration: both in the labour market and in social and cultural aspect. In the years after the changes, especially after our admission to the EU, in order to harmonize its policies with those of the Community, Bulgaria took some stricter measures, which to some extent made integration more difficult [13]. Similar conclusions have been confirmed by other studies [12, 14, 21], which is especially true for refugees from countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and the related defense and security of the country.

Refugees remain the most vulnerable group of migrants, and those for whom Bulgaria is not only a transit country and wish to stay, encounter some obstacles on their way to integration: both in the labour market and in other spheres. According to global analyses, people who arrive in Bulgaria (from outside the EU) face some barriers to integration [14]. However, the labour market, permanent residence, anti-discrimination and other factors are rated as favourable. Refugees enjoy basic rights and security, and current integration policies have been assessed as encouraging the public to view migrants as equals [14].

Research assesses that „migrants' access to the labour market in our country is favourable for those who reside long-term and open to pre-recipient migrants, as they (as well as their family members) have equal access to social security with Bulgarian citizens“ [14]. As we indicated at the beginning, however, the more vulnerable group is that of refugees with a much weaker integration in the labour market. They are considered a more vulnerable group due to several factors that make it difficult for them to access the labour market [13]: they do not know the Bulgarian language; some of them have low education; the highly qualified find it difficult to prove their education/ qualification; social support networks are less developed than migrant networks; refugees find it much more difficult than migrants to navigate the new environment.

Another serious obstacle is the difficulty in hiring asylum seekers due to the validity of their documents, as they receive employment rights for a period of three months (administratively increased every three months, but with a validity of up to 9 months and the need for a physical renewal) [12]. However, this also has its own explanation: Bulgaria is considered a transit country for more than 80-90% of refugees, and a large part of Bulgarian employers do not want to conclude a contract with persons with temporary protection, for a period longer than the period of validity of the their documents.

The disadvantages in terms of structure also create a barrier for the integration of migrants in our country. These shortcomings are related to the negative attitudes of public opinion, an important indicator of which is the discrepancy between people's perception of the presence of migrants and those actually present in the population. According to specialists, this discrepancy between attitude and reality is due to three main factors: the excessive number of fake news, the frequent lack of information about the host society, the presence of misinformation especially in social networks [15]. Loud media statements that "refugees are a problem for the country's security, not a humanitarian problem" or that "refugees are a threat to the religious and ethnic composition of the Bulgarian people" create anti-migration attitudes and have a strong negative impact on integration policy [15].

Research shows that the majority of Bulgarian citizens do not even know or come into contact with refugees and migrants, i.e. this „Bulgarian case“ is specific for other reasons. The anti-migration attitudes of our society are not due to a negative experience or an increased number of migrants, since their number (relative share and absolute number) of the population remains low; is not related to threats to the religious / ethnic composition of Bulgarians, but to the change of the entire general landscape [13].

The issue of competition for available material resources for refugees from Ukraine compared to other socially vulnerable groups in the country is also significant. What the state undertakes and grants as social assistance to refugees is [16]:

- One-time assistance in the amount of BGN 375, as well as targeted assistance for issuing an identity card, the maximum amount of which is up to BGN 75.
- Individuals and their families whose income for the previous month is lower than the individually determined differentiated minimum income and who meet the legally regulated conditions are entitled to monthly social assistance.
- Targeted heating aid for refugees is granted for five months for the upcoming heating season.
- Refugees who receive monthly allowances and targeted assistance for heating are provided with health care at the expense of the state budget, and those who have no income or personal property are entitled to targeted funds for diagnosis and treatment in medical facilities for hospital assistance.
- People from Ukraine with disabilities and those who are socially vulnerable, including those benefiting from temporary protection, have the same rights as Bulgarian citizens with disabilities and socially vulnerable groups.

- For all types of resources from the state, Ukrainian refugees can apply after having been issued a registration card for granted temporary protection.

Regarding the competition in material resources, however, it is important to mention the accommodation of refugees. Unlike other EU countries, Bulgaria chooses not to pay the refugees themselves, but the places that shelter them. Thus, the accommodation places receive BGN 40 per day per accommodated refugee [17]. In the context of this, Bulgarian citizens from socially vulnerable groups also have the possibility of one-time, monthly and targeted benefits, but the competition for material funds, social benefits, services and resources has largely evolved due to misinformation and theories that very quickly adapt in the sea of news. Propaganda and emotional charge in many headlines quickly provoke reactions in society. Headlines like "For a Ukrainian - BGN 1,200 per month. For a Bulgarian pensioner - BGN 400" create the negative attitude that refugees from Ukraine have more rights and receive more funds than Bulgarian citizens [18]. The truth is that with their status for a certain period, refugees receive the same rights as Bulgarian citizens, and temporary protection provides the opportunity for work, education, health care, social services, i.e. they can receive one-time assistance of up to BGN 375, like Bulgarian citizens, and the assistance of BGN 40 per day is largely provided thanks to funds from the EU's cohesion funds, from which many other European countries also benefit. Fears of polarized opinions and the large number of fake news are gradually emerging among the Bulgarian society: that the Ukrainians will steal the work of the Bulgarians, that they live luxuriously, that they are a threat to society, that they carry infections, etc. [18]. Thus, despite the differences with other migrant groups, common similarities are also found, which not only negatively affect society, but also hinder the integration of refugees from Ukraine. While previous waves of disinformation targeting Middle Eastern refugees, for example, portrayed them as the cultural threat to Europe, Ukrainians were portrayed as a threat to the health, well-being and wealth of Europeans.

It is important to mention that among Bulgarians in general there is a contradictory attitude towards refugees and there is a wide range of both positive and negative as well as neutral attitudes: from empathy, compassion, sympathy, respect, concern, understanding, through neutrality and indifference, to fear, hatred, mistrust, loathing.

Studies before the war in Ukraine indicate that such contradictory attitudes also set a multidirectional social distance among the population towards the acceptance of refugees: people mostly do not agree that the country should accept refugees (59.0%); those who agree are twice as few (23.7%) and the rest cannot judge (17.3%) [19]. Nevertheless, Bulgarians still tend to accept refugees from countries where there is a military conflict (such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan); from countries with political persecution and violation of human rights and those from countries with natural and climate disasters.

Regardless of the fact that there are positive attitudes in some Bulgarian citizens for the reception of refugees, there is also a varying degree of social distance in relation to different local and migrant groups (especially non-European).

Previous studies have shown a high degree of social distance (spatial, labour and educational) in relation to migrant groups and refugees. EU citizens and generally those belonging to the Caucasian race, including Russians, are most accepted, while Muslim migrant groups (Arabs, Albanians, Kurds), migrants of African origin and Vietnamese are least accepted. Orthodox Slavic groups (Bessarabian Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Serbs) are considered to be well accepted [20].

The social distance of Bulgarians towards migrants from the most unwelcome group is greatest because they are associated with Islamic terrorism (the three relatively new ethnic minorities for Bulgaria: Arabs, Albanians, Kurds, are often defined as „fanatics“ and „aggressors“, which is an example of religious stereotyping) [20]. In contrast to them, it is striking that the Orthodox Slavic groups are classified as „brothers“, which explains the

smaller social distance to these groups (Bessarabian Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Serbs) [20]. Probably due to Bulgaria's ties to the Russian people, such attitudes remain more deeply rooted in the ideas of Bulgarian society.

The social distance towards the most unaccepted Muslim migrant groups and the more accepted Orthodox Slavic groups is evident in all its dimensions. As the degree of proximity decreases, social distance decreases, but nevertheless remains different for different groups of refugees: 17.0% of the people are agree Yes live with refugees in one block or adjacent houses (55.9% disagree); 22.2% are agree Yes live in one neighbourhood (50.3% disagree), 26.6% agree Yes live in one city / village (41.3% disagree) [19]. However, according to another survey, 39.3% of Bulgarians agreeing would live with refugees in the same block or neighboring houses if they are Ukrainians, but if they are representatives of Muslim migrant groups, this percentage drops to 23.2%; 39.4% would live in one neighbourhood if the refugees were Ukrainian, but if they were from the Muslim migrant groups, this percentage was 26.6%; 40.2% would live in the same town/village with Ukrainians, but with representatives of Muslim migrant groups the percentage is 30.2% [20]. Similar tendencies are also observed in working distances: 26.0% are agree Yes they have colleagues refugees (39.0% disagree) [19]. Again, however, 17.9% of those who agreed would work with refugees if they were Ukrainian, but if they were representatives of Muslim migrant groups, the percentage who agreed was 10.1% [20]. This everything also confirms regarding educational distances: 29.4 % of people are agree children on refugees Yes study in one class with their children (35.7% disagree) [19]. 17.7% of those agree with the attitude towards Ukrainians in 17.7%, and towards children from Muslim migrant groups, this percentage is 7.6% [20].

Other surveys after the start of the war show a dominant attitude in Bulgarian society of support and empathy for Ukrainian refugees: 63% share the opinion that it is „humane and moral everyone Yes helps with anything can on people befallen from misfortune“; 27% advocate the thesis that it is „human and moral Yes no everything helps on refugees if _ no are poorer from the Bulgarians“, and 10% do not have them opinion [21]. People from vulnerable groups, such as the poorly educated, unemployed, with low incomes, share the second opinion, in which the determining factor is not so much their social status as their ideological position: not to help if the refugees are poorer than the Bulgarians. The sensitive areas of these vulnerable groups can change their attitudes to the extent that even basic human values are altered. This attitude is also confirmed by the actually provided assistance to the Ukrainian refugees, i.e. regardless of the fact that there is an expression of sharing and support, in practice the help was provided by a very narrow circle of people: only 14.8% helped in some form (donated money / clothes, participated as volunteers, indicated help to a Ukrainian family), while 57% did not help at all because they did not have the opportunity. The remaining 15% take a more extreme position that Ukrainian refugees should not be helped (neither by the state, nor by volunteering or personally) [21].

The indicated share of 14.8% is approximately the same as those who generally help and participate in voluntary activities initiatives. This shows that civic activism and volunteering require activation and more systematic, more serious efforts on the part of civil society. Media coverage is far from enough to reduce social distance or change public attitudes, as social distance is initially driven by people's fears and the risks taken by accepting refugees: increasing on crime, conflicts due to cultural and ethnic and religious differences opposition, high state expenses for maintenance on refugees , increase on unemployment among he is Bulgarian, conflicts on the labour market, etc. [19].

However, regardless of the generally weak voluntary initiative and activity, it is considered the most adequate in relation to refugees from Ukraine, according to 30% of people, while 23% consider that the most appropriate response is the state and non-governmental organizations are indicated as „most adequate“ of 5,3% [21]. The possibility

that people do not make a connection between volunteers from different organizations and the active participation of civil organizations themselves in the process should not be overlooked, i.e. if volunteering is perceived as a highly positive activity, people want it to be well communicated to society, well communicated with it. In other words, public attitudes towards more closed NGOs are suspect when they are not supported by real actions, but support the activities of real volunteers.

Adding complexity to the picture is the functioning of government institutions, as they are the main agents in providing integration services for refugees. When it comes to the integration of refugees, it should be taken into account that it is a smaller number of people compared to those seeking temporary protection [22]. The need for different actions in the reception and subsequent integration of refugees should also be taken into account. While with the migrant waves from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the focus is on the security and well-being of society, with the refugees from Ukraine, more emphasis is placed on the work related to providing food, shelter, work; on the social inclusion of those wishing to reside permanently. The shift in focus does not necessarily mean inconsistency in migration and integration strategies: from a major focus on integration policy in 2008, the priority shifted to major emphasis on national security in 2011. National Migration Strategy (2021-2025) [23], as well as the Strategy's Temporary Protection Action Plan [24] also emphasize the preservation and protection of national borders, security policies and crisis responses. The action plan was adopted in July 2022, with the responsibility for the preparation and implementation of integration measures and policies falling to two ministries (social and e-governance) and the State Agency for Refugees. In both of the last documents [23, 24], as well as in the policy until now, the problem of the possibility of effective integration of refugees, both in the labour market and in the social environment in general, is addressed.

Together with public attitudes, social distancing and waves of misinformation, the presence of supporters of anti-migration discourse further complicates the situation: proposals to close refugee centres, populist talk that refugees are a security threat, etc. The rare cases of good practice most times are kept secret: when separate municipalities they have interest Yes accept refugees, but they are never specified which.

Bulgaria's previous experience with migration waves predetermines the entire process of integrating Ukrainian refugees into the Bulgarian labour market: it has been met with some criticism regarding the effectiveness of the policy and its organization, which is mainly related to the provision of aid for refugees. Some light and hope for change is given by the attitudes of people in civil and various non-governmental organizations. According to research, the share of people who firmly state that there are civil or non-governmental organizations or associations in the country that represent and defend their positions or assist in solving important problems for them has increased three times [21]. Although the share of people who know the work of such institutions and associations is still small, the share on those who are in there contact with them, which expands the base for trust and commitment to their activity [21].

Various organizations, associations, migrant themselves and some part of civil society are working hard for the integration of refugees. When this is shared and properly communicated, when there is communication, awareness and opportunities for open dialogue, including with employers and businesses, people can be more willing to take part in voluntary initiatives, help and support, and gradually change their attitudes towards migrant communities in general. However, for this, people need not closed initiatives and remaining hidden good practices, but real activities, results and benefits for integration.

In this regard, we examine the work of Invest Sofia in order to track what results can be achieved with a more timely response and real actions and work in connection with the integration of refugees in the labour market in our country.

The Capital Municipal Agency for Privatization and Investments (Invest Sofia; the Agency) is part of the general administration of the Capital Municipality [25]. Invest Sofia focuses on the development of Sofia as a modern innovative city by supporting business, development activities, startups and entrepreneurial projects from Bulgarian and foreign organizations. The agency provides advisory and legal assistance, information, analyses, contacts and guidance for starting a business in the capital of Bulgaria.

Not remaining indifferent to the situation in Ukraine and that of the refugees in our country, Invest Sofia takes actions for the timely labour integration of people already in the first weeks after the start of the war. On March 22, 2022, the "Jobs in Sofia" platform was presented to the Ukrainian community in support of those fleeing the war, establishing their daily life in our country, wanting to start work, looking for security and opportunities for faster integration [26]. Since Invest Sofia works not only with companies in the capital, but also with other large municipalities and a wide range of partners in Bulgaria, "Jobs in Sofia" has the opportunity to be a useful and effective tool for all points where there are Ukrainian refugees. The "Jobs in Sofia" platform is open to both companies and employers, as well as jobseekers, refugees who can quickly and easily create a profile and their professional resume, including attaching various documents, certificates and diplomas, even a video presentation. The accessibility of the platform is also important in this context, namely that it was created in Ukrainian, English, Bulgarian and Russian [27].

Speed, combined with professionalism and empathy for the problem, as well as intelligence regarding the more social aspects of refugee issues (integration, social inclusion, community), almost immediately create a significant number of reactions, benefits and effects. Already on April 1, 2022, a representative of the Ukrainian community joins the Invest Sofia team, who takes over the responsibility for the "Jobs in Sofia" platform and the duties related to the provision of assistance in connection with the opportunities to assist refugees in the Metropolitan Municipality (housing accommodation, education and training in the Bulgarian language, employment and access to the labour market, health care, social assistance and inclusion).

Invest Sofia becomes the main connecting link in establishing a direct link between employers and job seekers of Ukrainian refugees. Given the interest and opportunities, the work on the labour integration of refugees is divided into three stages, with full assistance of all participants from the Agency in each phase of the process:

First stage. Consultations and registration on the "Jobs in Sofia" platform for both Ukrainians and employers.

Second stage. Development of professional profiles / summary of the participants.

Third stage. Creating a direct connection between companies looking for personnel on the labour market and Ukrainian job seekers in the most appropriate, fast and efficient way possible.

A direct effect of the work of the "Jobs in Sofia" Agency is the attraction of a large part of Invest Sofia's partner network, including large HR companies and business representatives (Happy Group, ETEM, Adecco, InterContinental Sofia, etc.), and the results are not they are late In just three months, in addition to receiving more than 540 inquiries from Ukrainians to start work and attracting more than 20 capital companies, the benefits in numbers look like this:

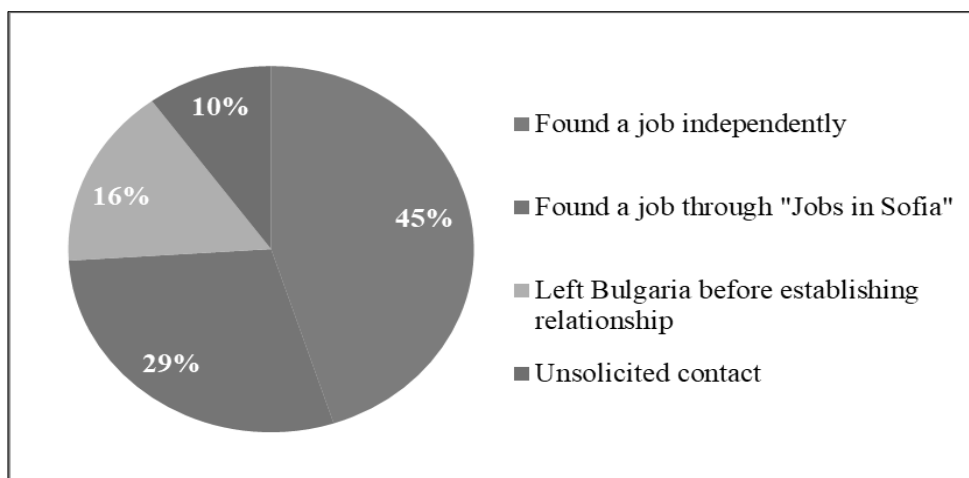


Fig. 1. Results of the "Jobs in Sofia" project as of June 30, 2022

Source: According to Invest Sofia data

The holding of various meetings with the Ukrainian community and the supporting organizations in Sofia is quickly taking place. Only some of the important partners are: "Caritas Bulgaria" (association for social activities in support of vulnerable groups of the Catholic Church in Bulgaria); the local team of the European project RIDE (initiative for the inclusion of migrant and refugee women in the digital labour market); Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry; "Open Sofia" Foundation, Sofia Development Association, Networking Premium Co-working, etc.

In general, the initiatives and meetings of Invest Sofia, with a focus on the "Jobs in Sofia" platform, mainly aim at practical usefulness, help and effective real cooperation in the field of labour integration of refugees settled in the capital.

What we observe from the presented data (Figure 1), apart from the contribution of the Agency, is that a total of 74% are employed, given the opportunity to integrate into the labour market Ukrainians within three months of starting the project, which also shows the result of - the intensive reaction for the rapid integration of refugees in the labor market in Bulgaria.

Provoked by the war in Ukraine, a little later, in October 2022, a Refugee Advocacy Board was created in our country as part of the project "Partnership for Sustainable Refugee Integration" of the Centre for Development of Sustainable Communities and the "Active Citizens" fund" [26]. The members of the Board are trained in different modules, meet with representatives of different institutions, in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills that will allow them to integrate, participate in social processes in our country and have the opportunity to help other refugees in Bulgaria - as well as from Ukraine, as well as from Afghanistan, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Kuwait. This also enables the continuous improvement, modelling and adaptation of the "Jobs in Sofia" platform so that it is useful to all migrants and refugees who have sought asylum in our country.

4 Conclusion

This analysis shows various obstacles and challenges in the way of the integration of refugees in the labour market in Bulgaria. Migration is a highly politicized topic in our country, and it is also directly related to national security, identity and economic growth [28]. Unfortunately, this is often used in anti-refugee discourses and "successfully" shapes

much of the public attitude of people towards refugee and migrant communities: fear, mistrust, neglect, reluctance to contact, large social distances, negativity, reluctance to help, support, volunteering. Therefore, the efforts of all are necessary: state institutions, local authorities, non-governmental and civil organizations, as well as their joint work with the media and the public to inform citizens.

Advocacy and increasing the interest and awareness of society is a very important step towards the integration of refugees in the labour market. In addition to targeted activities, media partnerships and campaigns, countering fake news and disinformation is very important. Along with this, the actually performed activities and the achieved results should be presented to the public and its involvement (especially employers, civil organizations and the refugees themselves). In this way, it is declared to the public that work is being done effectively and successfully for the integration of refugees, which also increases the likelihood of changes in their attitude and subsequent inclusion through help and support.

The results of this analysis also show that participation and inclusion in initiatives such as "Jobs in Sofia" increase the likelihood that refugees will be employed, which in turn, reduces the likelihood of social exclusion. The effect of such programs is immediate and lasting, and they can bring not only direct but also indirect benefits to refugees and their labour integration in general.

Invest Sofia's initiative can also contribute to increasing the possibility of refugees' continuity, mitigating factors of social exclusion, including unemployment and poverty, as well as being a basis for further development and implementation of other state policies and measures related to labour integration. It is such programs that can be a reaction engine for launching the important components of long-term integration programs and for changes in public attitudes, as civil society remains the main, consistent and committed „spokesperson“ when it comes to integration, inclusion and development.

When we talk about the successful integration of refugees in the labor market, as well as the fact that the efforts of all interested parties are necessary: management elite, non-governmental and civil organizations, society, it should be borne in mind that the creation of networks for peer support, employment consultations, support for employment initiatives. Ways should also be sought to expand partnerships with the private sector to include the refugee population in employment opportunities, as well as initiate social cohesion activities in the community [10].

The initiative of Invest Sofia is an example of good local practice for integration, for economic and social dialogue between refugees and employers, for a working approach along the „migration - integration - development“ path.

In summary, it can be said that there is no reason why similar practices cannot be relied upon both in a city like Sofia and in other settlements that can also benefit from the implementation of similar intervention programs. They have the ability to contribute for more civic participation, positive moods and attitudes among the host society, easier social inclusion, including in the labour market, and more contribution to integration processes.

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