

Bulgaria Human Security Chronicle 5 – May 2014

Intergroup tolerance and xenophobia

Arrivals of Syrian asylum seekers cause tensions in Bulgaria

On 25 April, 2014, the inhabitants of the central Bulgarian village of Rozovo – ethnic Bulgarians – went out in [protest](#) in front of one of the village houses. The reason – three refugee families from Syria (17 people in total, children included), who had acquired their official legal residents' status some days before, had moved in the house after signing a lease contract with the owner of the house, as normal practice in Bulgaria and everywhere in the world is. The Rozovo villagers, however, did not savour the idea that they will have Syrian people as neighbours and organised themselves into a noisy protest to chase the Syrians out of Rozovo. Some 150 ethnic Bulgarian Rozovo residents [chanted](#) “Bulgaria for the Bulgarians!” and similar slogans. They succeeded – the Syrian families had to [move](#) out. A businessman from the nearby village of Kran, however, showed sympathy to the expelled people and [leased](#) them his own house.



Rozovo residents protesting in front of the house accommodating three Syrian families. Photo credit: BGNES/Segabg.com

The Rozovo case is symptomatic of the deep scepticism, sometimes growing to outright intolerance, the Bulgarian society has for migrants, especially for those from the Middle East and Africa who have been arriving as asylum seekers to the European Union. The [arrivals](#) from Syria as a result of the civil war there had their peak in late 2013 (they reached some 10-11,000, a tiny figure compared to the figures in Turkey or Lebanon), demonstrating several important things: 1) Bulgaria's capacity to accept refugees



and asylum seekers is inferior, with conditions in state facilities merely disastrous; 2) the state institutions are not prepared to react adequately to an influx of migrants, sometimes even violating human rights in order to deal with the problem; and 3) sadly, the Bulgarian society, especially people in small towns and villages, is intolerant and xenophobic towards newcomers in need such as the migrants from Syria. These conclusions are a token of a worsening human security situation in Bulgaria vis-à-vis intergroup tolerance and the general respect for human rights and diversity.

Rozovo is not an isolated case. In November 2013, at the peak of the crisis, the residents of the northern village of Telish rose in [protest](#) as information was leaked that the Interior Ministry planned to open a refugee shelter in the village in a deserted state-owned building. One man even threatened to set himself ablaze in disagreement; the plans were abandoned. In the capital Sofia, there were several cases of [assaults](#) on migrants by extreme nationalist groups. These groups even organised themselves in vigilante patrols in the central Sofia district where most migrants dwell “in order to promote the order and cause respect in criminally-minded migrants,” but the Prosecutor’s Office intervened to terminate this illegal practice. According to a public opinion [poll](#) from December 2013, some 62% of Bulgarians were against the arrival of new refugees on the territory of the country. Some commentators opined that these attitudes were really striking, given that historically Bulgarians have been very receptive to waves of migration caused by disasters abroad (the three waves of migration of ethnic Bulgarians from the Ottoman-controlled territories of Macedonia and Thrace in late 19th-early 20th centuries and the wave of Armenian refugees after the mass killings of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915). And at the same time, Bulgarians feel wronged when they read of negative attitude towards Bulgarian migrants in the United Kingdom or Germany.

One reason for the rise in scepticism about migrants and xenophobia in Bulgaria may be in the deteriorated media landscape: [forum](#) is often given, uncritically, to far-right and populist politicians who rely on hate speech in their campaigns, thus rendering intolerance and dislike for the different a valid political instrument which is part of the publicly accepted discourse. Indeed, according to Reporters Without Borders, Bulgaria [dropped](#) 13 places to 100th position in the organisation’s 2014 World Press Freedom Index. Media ownership is vague but informally concentrated into a single business group, with many channels either used by those circles to promote their political goals or directly owned by political parties and used for propaganda (such as the Alpha TV channel owned by the far-right and populist party Ataka).

The other serious issue arising from the Syrian refugee crisis in Bulgaria is the total incapacity to handle an influx and, most importantly, the inadequate behaviour of the responsible institutions. Bulgaria has a total of seven facilities sheltering asylum seekers – three in Sofia and four scattered in the southeast of the country near the Turkish border. The shelters were more than inadequate to handle the number of asylum seekers during the peak of the crisis in November-December 2013, and the very living conditions in them were dire. It came as far as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [urged](#) in January 2014 European governments to hold off returning asylum



seekers to Bulgaria because of problems with basic services in the country. Renovation works at the facilities have started since then with support from the European Union.



*Syrian refugees at the Voenna Rampa shelter in Sofia.
Photo credit: Yuliana Nikolova (dariknews.bg)/vesti.bg*

But what is most worrying is the attitude of the Bulgarian state institutions towards the asylum seekers and the problem as a whole. The country started turning away migrants at the Turkish border without legal foundation in late 2013, probably compelled to do so by the accommodation capacity issues. It earned the [criticism](#) of both the UN and the EU. In April 2014, a devastating [report](#) was published by international watchdog Human Rights Watch, claiming that Bulgaria was “summarily” expelling asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan and other places who were irregularly crossing the border from Turkey. It also used excessive force and provided bad treatment at detention centres and police stations.

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