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How Bulgaria is dealing with the influx of Ukrainian refugees

The Bulgarian civil society has managed to accommodate the majority of Ukrainian refugees, but dire help needed from the State is nowhere in sight

Three months after the beginning of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, Adelina Banakieva, a volunteer from Sofia, does not know the exact number of Ukrainian refugees for whom she has provided shelter and support. At the moment there are 26 people, all of them adults. 'I don't know how many cats and dogs there are,' she said.

For years she has been working to help children with disabilities in Bulgaria and their mothers. Because of this experience, she is in charge of some of the most serious cases among those fleeing the war in Ukraine – children with cerebral palsy and epilepsy. She sends these cases abroad, because in Bulgaria there are no mechanisms to ensure adequate treatment for them, nor opportunities for their parents to start work. And she does this alone, without the help of institutions. There is support from donors, volunteers, and the media. 'I have the feeling that I am driving along a motorway and I don't have time to look at the navigation and I don't know where I am going. That's how it is for all of us volunteers at the moment,' Adelina commented.

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As in many other countries, in Bulgaria it was volunteers and civil society organisations that were the first to welcome the unprecedented stream of refugees caused by the war against Ukraine. As fast as lightning, Bulgarian citizens organised themselves, opened their homes to Ukrainians, and began to provide them with transport to the country borders and from the Ukrainian border regions.

With the help of businesses and the non-governmental sector, they took on the provision of humanitarian and psychological support, childcare, cultural, and entertainment activities to bring a drop of normality in the

new daily life of people seeking protection in our country. And if in the first days of the crisis, this could be considered normal – bearing in mind the greater flexibility and adaptability of the civil sector –, then in the second month after the start of hostilities, weariness, and dissatisfaction with the cumbersome response of institutions could be observed among volunteers.

'We are facing a humanitarian disaster'

According to data from the Council of Ministers, published on the official government portal in support of Ukrainian refugees, as of 18 April, nearly 195,000 Ukrainian citizens had crossed the borders of the country, and just over 91,000 had chosen to stay here (35,000 of them children). The data published also shows that over 50,000 Ukrainian citizens are accommodated in hotels or state and local departmental buildings under the 'Programme for the Use of Humanitarian Aid for Displaced Persons from Ukraine', which entered into force in mid-March. This means that more than a third of the refugees from Ukraine have been taken in by Bulgarian citizens.

However, the uncontrolled private housing of refugees, mostly mothers with children, involves risks, such as human trafficking, sexual and labour exploitation, and homelessness, says Diana Dimova, founder and chairman of 'Mission Wings', an organisation that supports the most vulnerable groups in Bulgarian society. She herself has faced several similar cases since the beginning of the crisis, helping Ukrainian women to be accommodated in sheltered housing. Yet, the national aid programme to accommodate refugees is in force until the end of May, and at the moment the government has no plans to extend it. It provides the places for accommodation with 40 BGN (approximately €20) per day per refugee for shelter and food.

From the very beginning, the programme has been subject to criticism since, on the one hand, it legitimises only business and state property as beneficiaries of financial support, whilst the programme does not address the expenses of volunteers, who provide for the needs of refugees out of their own budgets. On the other hand, it cannot be sustained due to the upcoming summer tourist season.
Most of the Ukrainians are accommodated in hotels on the Black Sea coast because of the large number of beds, but also due to the fact that they themselves know the Bulgarian seaside resorts as tourists and prefer to opt for the familiar. The fact that there are substantial Russian and Ukrainian-speaking communities in the region of Varna and Burgas, which provide great support to newcomers, should not be overlooked. However, this is leading to the overcrowding of coastal towns and resorts,

which do not have the capacity to offer the health, social, and educational services necessary for tens of thousands of mothers with children.

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'We are facing a humanitarian disaster. At the end of May, the tourist season begins and the accommodation plan expires. The government is thinking of taking these people to the winter resorts. Is this what we are going to do this with these people, drive them to the sea and to ski, and change them every six months? These are traumatised children, people who do not know what to do, or where to go, with many different needs,' commented Diana Dimova.

The cabinet has not yet announced plans about how or where the more than 50,000 people along the Black Sea coast should be relocated. According to Krassimira Velichkova, adviser to the departmental Deputy Prime Minister Kalina Konstantinova, data is currently being collected on the available positions in departmental bases of state-owned enterprises and companies to which Ukrainians will be redirected.

Currently, the new government find themselves in a situation in which they have to build a refugee policy from scratch. 'We are not just in an emergency situation that would be difficult for anyone to cope with, and this is not because the systems do not work, but because we often face fierce opposition from all around,' admits Krassimira Velichkova. Simultaneously, the government is currently working on drastic changes in legislation in various areas to ensure the most simplified procedure for Ukrainian refugees to 'stand on their own two feet', and receive social support and health rights, because at the moment they have access only to hospital treatment. 'Institutions are slow machines, it takes time to write everything,' she points out.

'We don't have a policy for anything'

Despite the more positive attitude towards the refugees fleeing from Russian aggression, the government's social policy does not differ much from that towards people who have fled conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Recipients of temporary protection have access to one-time financial assistance from the Social Assistance Agency of up to BGN 375 (approximately €190), for which in practice they wait about two months.

The government does not provide them with other forms of financial support, expecting them to enter the labour market as quickly as possible.

According to the Minister of Innovation and Growth Daniel Lorer, employers have announced 150,000 vacancies for Ukrainians in the sectors of IT, transport, tourism, etc., a number that Atanaska Todorova of CITUB, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, considers inflated.

This means that refugees, mostly woman with one or more children, must cover their rent and support their families with only BGN 710 (approximately €360) per month.

'Where are these vacancies – no one can answer us,' she explains. 'We can say that 1,000 people have started work – out of 83,000 who have stayed in the country. This is a very small percentage, given that they have the legal opportunity to work and are facilitated, compared to other refugees,' she added. The salary is also a problem, since, according to the trade unionist, most of the jobs offered are paying minimum wage. This means that refugees, mostly woman with one or more children, must cover their rent and support their families with only BGN 710 (approximately €360) per month.

In addition to these challenges, it is not clear how the issue of childcare for thousands of Ukrainian children will be settled, so that their mothers can work, given the shortage of places in municipal nurseries and kindergartens for Bulgarian families as well. Access to education is also a challenge due to problems with the vaccination cards of Ukrainian children and the language barrier. The Ministry of Education and Science has already announced that the education system can accommodate up to 60,000 children.

The question of what Bulgaria will do if several hundred thousand come to our country in the coming months remains unanswered. 'We have no policy for them. We don't have a policy for anything,' commented Adelina Banakieva, the volunteer from Sofia.



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