

Study on Private Sector Engagement in the Employment of Beneficiaries of International Protection in Bulgaria



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Since August 2013, Bulgaria has experienced a big increase in asylum applications from predominantly Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, which the national and regional institutions were not fully prepared to manage. Consequently, Bulgaria has been faced with a set of challenges concerning especially integration, which will remain a difficult task to handle for years to come. The social and economic integration of beneficiaries of international protection presents great challenges but also great potential for Bulgaria's society and economy. Employment of is one of the most important tools for social and economic inclusion and participation in society. Qualification, re-qualification and job matching of those disadvantaged people in order to mobilize their potential for inclusion, are among the most powerful ways to foster integration.

Providing an empirically grounded understanding of the attitudes of employers, trade unions, and employer associations when it comes to recruiting and employing refugees in Bulgaria, the present research is based on a survey including 15 private companies, 2 human resources and recruitment companies, 7 chambers of commerce and political & economic special interest groups, 6 civil society organizations working with refugees as well as the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, the Bulgarian Employment Agency, Invest Bulgaria Agency and the State Agency for Refugees.

Legal Framework for Refugee Employment

	Right to Work	Access to Employment Programs	Coverage of health insurance	Documentation
Asylum Seeker	3 months after application for asylum	YES	By State	Certificate issued by State Agency for Refugees stating the right to work
Humanitarian Status holder	YES Full employment rights, equal legal framework as BG citizens	YES	By Employer	ID document is sufficient
Refugee	YES Full employment rights, equal legal framework as BG citizens	YES	By Employer	ID document is sufficient

Situation of Refugees in Bulgaria

Since 2013, the number of asylum applications in Bulgaria amounted to just over 58 000 at 28.02.2017 – an average of 14 500 per year, compared to a total of 1 387 asylum applications in Bulgaria in 2012¹. Despite these relatively high numbers, Bulgaria remains a so-called transit country. Only a small fraction of those asylum seekers and status holders are staying in the country permanently. According to the State Agency for Refugees, approximately 14% of asylum seekers are women. Children make up 34% of applications for international protection, of which 18% are aged 0-13 years and 16% 14-17 years old. About 52% of asylum seekers are men aged 18 and older.

There is no coordinated, centralized system of collecting skill profiles and educational qualifications of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria. This is done only sporadically. The latest data from State Agency for Refugees² from March 2017 indicates the level of education of asylum seekers at 50% with 8th grade or high school education, 43% with no or elementary education and 7% with specialised or university education. Most desired occupations of asylum seekers and refugees are: Construction, Food preparation, Transport, Textile Industry, Factory work and Sales.

The survey shows that most asylum seekers and refugees are seeking work in the area of their expertise as there was a great overlap of desired positions and previous experience. It was also found that job seekers due to their particular social circumstances displayed a great willingness to accept work that is more unique and common to Bulgaria such as factory work, translation services for refugee-oriented NGOs and call centres with projects in the Middle East.

Barriers to Employment

Since the beginning of 2014, the Bulgarian state does not offer targeted integration support to beneficiaries of international protection. Integration services such as Bulgarian language classes, housing support, professional education classes or help with child care and enrollment of children in school – which are essential for successful realization and integration into national workforce – are not provided by the state. As a result, refugees are most often unprepared for the Bulgarian employment market. Main access barriers for beneficiaries of international protection on the Bulgarian employment

¹ State Agency for Refugees Bulgaria <http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=8>

² State Agency for Refugees - 67th coordination meeting for managing the refugee crisis in Bulgaria

market include the lack of integration services; low educational backgrounds; legal recognition of skills & qualifications; lack of social networks; health conditions; lack of job-seeking skills; gender-based issues and social discrimination.

When it comes to job matching, the services of the Employment Agency were multiple times criticized as non-sufficient by the questioned companies. Even though refugees are entitled to social and administrative support, they often lack information and/or translation services in order to register at the Labour bureaus. Furthermore, vocational training and the available employment support programs require a good level of Bulgarian language skills. Consequently, they rarely benefit from any programs available to job-seekers and in general do not register at the Labour Bureaus.

A positive practice is the engagement of social workers from different civil society organizations who have started communication with private companies and are collecting job-seekers' skill profiles and employment requests. The same organizations have started offering CV-writing trainings and individual job-seeking support. They provide interpretation services, mediation with institutions and accompany job-seekers to the Labour Bureaus. What has been considered the most fruitful practice by employers are the specialized job fairs for asylum seekers and refugees.

Employment Politics

The potential of the private sector is considerable, if businesses would become more active and self-organize in order to push public policies to reach out to new potential workforce. Economic interest groups have stated that for them inclusion is a priority when it comes to employment policies in order to counter-measure negative demographic trends and emigration. Only a small proportion of civil society actors and economic interest groups reported being pro-actively consulted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and other public institutions when it came to strategy making or the participation in working groups on operational programs. After political will and administrative reforms, it was also stressed that employment and qualification measures need to consider market needs more actively and seek input from non state-run economic interest groups and the private sector. Labour legislation is implemented only after obligatory consultation with employees, employers and their special interest groups. This is essential, when considering a more active involvement of the private sector in advocating for improvements in employment policies.

Political and economic interest groups highlighted the fact that existing measures and strategies need to be put into action more effectively, through the provision of easy access, the promotion of existing opportunities among refugees and the widening of scope of employment support measures to combine the needs of job-seekers and employers. None of the priorities of the existing employment programs are tailored specifically to disadvantaged groups such as refugees.

Human resource and recruitment companies were identified as the most fruitful cooperation partner and a potential bridge between state-run programs such as operational programs and special interest groups from the private sector, as they serve both those stakeholder groups on a regular basis.

Employment Needs

Key concerns for employers according to our survey are documentation and administrative framework of hiring beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers, their language skills and qualification, recruitment channels that need to be used to reach the target groups and retention of the employees from these groups.

According to the current survey, employers are looking for middle-skilled and mid-level technical staff in big numbers. Following are low-skilled occupations, but more articulated are high-qualified technical occupations. Most reported vacancies required either 8th grade, high school or higher education. A promising practice is that almost all interviewed businesses expressed that the lack of formal documents is not a reason to dismiss a candidate, provided they can otherwise prove their skills. Many companies already conduct their own tests to assess a candidate's skills and expressed willingness to extend or adapt their training process to refugee job-seekers given some basic preconditions.

The study shows that main motivation for businesses to hire from less obvious communities and to invest in qualification and their inclusion in the company culture is the lack of adequate staff and less so their corporate social responsibility policies. After collecting input from several chambers of commerce, public institutions as well as civil society, there was a consensus on four main areas that should be improved to encourage businesses to hire more refugees, humanitarian status holders and asylum seekers.

- Access to information about refugees as well as about regulations and administrative requirements
- Targeted job-matching efforts
- Effective facilitation of existing employment programs
- Improvement of the communication & consultation with the private sector

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<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgaria-private-sector-engagement-in-the-employment-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection>