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REFUGEE ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN BULGARIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

ABSTRACT: *This study examines the challenges and opportunities to educational access for refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria amid the ongoing mixed migration inflows to the European Union. Considering the country's ongoing demographic crisis, including the constantly declining number of students at the university level, this paper identifies critical gaps between legal entitlements and practical implementation in their access to education. The study argues that the inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection in the education system in Bulgaria remains limited due to administrative and capacity shortcomings, and an overall lack of political will. It further underscores the pivotal role of education in facilitating successful integration and outlines advanced targeted policy recommendations to address these systemic shortcomings, including any disparities in treatment among the various groups of individuals granted international protection.*

KEYWORDS: *access to education, higher education, refugee integration, asylum seekers, refugee children.*

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INTRODUCTION

Mixed migration has remained a central and contentious issue within the European Union (EU) since 2013. With two significant surges in first-time asylum applications between 2014 and 2016 and between 2022 and 2024 (Eurostat, 2025), and given the presence of several currently ongoing armed conflicts, the relevance of this topic to contemporary politics is undeniable. Concerning this, a crucial question is the integration of those granted refugee status or another form of international protection. As a key factor in this regard, education plays a vital role, particularly in the lives of children and youngsters. In fact, education is enshrined as a fundamental human right under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2025) and finds a central place in both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Nowadays, education may be of paramount importance to refugee integration in the host society, especially in fragile situations like those in which refugees and other displaced people find themselves, as it gives them a sense of stability and normality, as well as opportunities for subsequent economic self-sufficiency (Cerna, 2019). However, the education opportunities available to refugees and asylum seekers in many EU host countries have so far been accompanied by various challenges. The Republic of Bulgaria is a case in point where rights and challenges coexist due to the lack of political will and long-term policies regarding the beneficiaries of international protection and their place in the Bulgarian economy and society. Persistent barriers such as limited funding, insufficient support mechanisms, and a shortage of trained staff in the country's education system are further exacerbated by lengthy administrative procedures and the confinement of asylum seekers in Registration and Reception Centres (RRCs), which contribute to their marginalization and social exclusion (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2025).

These and other related challenges contribute to the low inclusion rates of refugees and asylum seekers in the Bulgarian educational system. For example, in 2024, only 55 of them started school in Bulgaria (AIDA, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee & ECRE, 2025). This can be seen as a systematic failure of the state, as even more than a decade ago, only 96 out of 520 refugee children were enrolled in Bulgarian schools (Angarev, 2014). At the same time, there is no publicly available official data regarding the number of refugees enrolled in higher education institutions. Instead, even the government's decision to provide up to 400 places in the regular form of education in HEIs for foreign citizens granted temporary protection (Marinova, 2024) can be seen as not only delayed but also as scarce and limited to only Ukrainians.

All these structural obstacles hinder the effective refugee inclusion in the national education system and the country's socio-economic life, underlining the need for a more active state role in that regard. This will not only support beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria, but it will also bring economic and social benefits to the country, while fighting certain political narratives.

Research Questions

Concerning the afore-mentioned issues, this paper poses the following research questions:

- What are the main challenges that refugees face in accessing education in Bulgaria?

- What is the scale and demographic profile of refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria in relation to their access to education?
- Do demographic and educational characteristics of beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria affect their integration prospects into the Bulgarian education system?
- What opportunities does refugee education present for Bulgaria amid its demographic crisis and declining student population?

By looking for answers to these questions, the present paper aims to contribute to the solution of other persistent challenges to the Bulgarian education system, namely its slow internationalization and adaptability to fast-changing political, economic, demographic and security context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality education is broadly regarded as a main tool for successful integration (e.g. Rönnlund et al., 2024; Namata et al., 2025), as it fosters social inclusion (Koehler and Schneider, 2019) and enables the meaningful participation of newcomers in the host country's social, cultural, and economic life (Adeusi et al., 2025). Yet, integration measures vary across the host countries, reflecting different historical contexts, as well as economic, political, and social aspects (Ferris, 2020). In fact, while on the move and upon arrival in a host country, refugees and asylum seekers face many challenges, including in terms of education. Their experiences in this regard depend on their country of origin, individual and contextual background, including race, ethnicity, religion, cultural and other socio-economic factors. Consequently, adaptation requires time, particularly when there are evident cultural, language, and social differences (AbuJarour, 2022).

For example, recent studies show both the promise and complexity of integrating Ukrainian refugees into host-country education systems. While education has a key role in helping them to reestablish psychosocial health and counter societal inclusion (Demidenko, 2023), national policies among the EU member states have proven to be pivotal (Herbst and Sitek, 2023). Access to education may be regarded as further shaped by the media and public perception in host countries. In some cases, as in the one of Bulgaria, the initially positive

attitudes toward Ukrainians have shifted to more negative sentiment over time, likely affecting the latter's rate of acceptance in schools (Brestnichka et al. 2025).

The integration of refugees displaced due to armed conflict is further complicated by their likely unpreparedness to leave their countries of origin, resulting in greater mental health-associated risks (Hocking et al., 2015). In fact, in the case of refugees, trauma plays an important role in their integration, including in the host state education system. As Koehler and Schneider (2019) state, refugees who experienced trauma, particularly those who were out of school for some time, may face legal restrictions that can limit their access to education in the host country. According to Benson et al. (2018), refugee children, for example, are crucially influenced in psychological terms by their refugee experiences. Among such traumatic experiences are witnessing violence, the loss of loved ones, and the sudden abandonment of their homes and communities (Hosin, 2001; ISSOP Migration Working Group, 2017). Kolbel (2024) highlights this, arguing that "war-related trauma and language barriers" limit the chance of Ukrainian children to access education. In the case of higher education, even in Ukraine itself a group of students who experienced war trauma is entirely a new challenge for the country, as their academic engagement, sense of belonging and mental health and well-being might be seriously impacted (Tsybuliak et al., 2024). Moreover, prior to the war in Ukraine, European policy largely overlooked the place of refugees within the higher education system (Morrice, 2022), which has made the integration of Ukrainian refugees into higher education a bigger challenge for the EU Member States.

Although refugee students represent a particularly vulnerable group, education systems within the EU do not always meet their needs, hindering their integration into the host societies (Cerna, 2019). This is all the more important since education can help refugees in a way not to be seen as a burden to their host countries (Demir et al., 2024). As Bonin (2017) notes, while the education of migrants in general may be associated with additional costs for the host society in the short-term, in the long-term it should be regarded as an investment.

Nonetheless, many EU countries have been facing challenges when it comes to providing adequate opportunities for refugee integration into their education systems, especially in the case of the significant migrant influx towards the EU since 2011, trying to implement mainly ad-hoc contextual measures (Koehler and Schneider, 2019). Dryden-Peterson (2016) argues that refugee children often find themselves in a situation where the universal human rights encounter the definition of citizenship rights within the host nations

and their realization in practice. At the same time, many factors, such as institutional and legal challenges, social isolation, discrimination, and disrupted educational experiences, are among the main obstacles to refugees' access to higher education (Berg, 2023). To these may be added financial and language barriers, as well as the recognition of a previously acquired diploma in the country of origin (Crea, 2016; AlKharouf et al., 2024; AIDA & ECRE, 2025).

Other challenges are also to be taken into consideration. For example, some scholars note that in certain Western countries the language courses offered to refugees are mainly mediocre, which suggests that the latter cannot be admitted to universities (Abamosa, 2024). In addition to long waiting times in terms of recognition of pre-arrival qualifications, the lack of academic language training programmes for refugees contributes to their underrepresentation in higher education institutions, as in the case of Norway (Abamosa, 2024a).

Crul et al. (2019) argue in their study on the integration of refugee children from Syria in Germany, Greece, Lebanon, Sweden, and Türkiye, that their parents are more cooperative in the countries perceived as final destinations, while they struggle in obviously transit countries with less financial resources and more refugees, who, along with the local population and authorities, regard the situations as mainly temporary.

METHODOLOGY

This study analyses the current state of educational access for individuals seeking or granted international protection in Bulgaria, underlining the existing challenges and opportunities. It adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining desk-based research, secondary data analysis, policy document review, and expert survey to provide a comprehensive assessment of the topic.

The desk research is based on publicly accessible information and the data, related to the demographic profile of asylum seekers in Bulgaria and the scale of their enrolment in the Bulgaria education system is obtained from the Ministry of Education and Science and the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria through the provisions of the Access to Public Information Act. The study combines analysis of secondary data and policy documents, along with an expert survey, conducted online from 28 May to 4 June 2025 via a pre-developed Google Form questionnaire among 53 specialists

working with individuals seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria. Participants included representatives from state institutions (the State Agency for Refugees, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy), NGOs, academic institutions, and international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM.

Throughout this paper, the term “refugees” refers to all people granted international protection. At the same time, under the term “children”, we consider all individuals under the age of 18. The study also encompasses both refugee children and those aged 18 who pursue or would like to pursue an educational degree, including at a higher education level. While this may bring some confusion regarding the challenges various age groups face at different levels of education and, respectively, the conclusions that can be drawn, a more comprehensive perspective underlines the systematic symptoms of the study problem. In other words, the paper outlines the main common challenges and thus, a common approach to overcome these challenges.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Current challenges to refugee access to education in Bulgaria

The mixed migration issue gained prominence in Bulgarian politics during the 2013–2016 wave of mixed migration to the EU and has since influenced many election campaigns. The importance of education to integration, however, has been rather left out, even though newcomers often indicate that providing education and language training is among the key contributing factors for their integration (Erolova, 2019). We argue that providing proper education services to refugees and asylum seekers has been of low priority for several Bulgarian governments since 2013, with language and orientation courses frequently provided by non-governmental organizations, mainly due to limited state capacity (Dimitrov, 2024). Concerning this, some surveys have highlighted widespread concerns over the government’s inability to deliver adequate educational support (e.g., FCJ Refugee Centre, 2014).

Systemic shortcomings in Bulgaria, most notably insufficient language support, chronic underfunding of essential services, deterioration of reception infrastructure, and persistently low levels of public awareness, are further confirmed by an expert survey conducted between 28 May and 4 June 2025 and focused on four key domains, including access to education and training. The survey encompassed 53 participants representing state and international

institutions, academia, and non-governmental organizations, all of whom were directly or indirectly involved in providing support to individuals seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria. In particular, the findings underscore divergences in expert perceptions regarding access to education, with 64.2% identifying language acquisition as the principal prerequisite for integration. In fact, a similar conclusion can be drawn from the 2024 UNHCR Participatory Assessment Report, which highlights the significant language barrier: 76% of the participants in the focus group discussions did not speak Bulgarian, and only 10% of all were taking Bulgarian language classes (UNHCR, 2025a, p. 16). Moreover, none of the Syrian participants (56% of all participants) was able to speak Bulgarian, while 62% of the Ukrainian refugees (40% of the total) reported speaking it (Ibid.).

Although in Bulgaria “foreigners, granted international protection, are entitled to primary and secondary education, including vocational education and professional training under the conditions and procedures applicable to Bulgarian citizens” (Council of Ministers, 2002), and compulsory school education at state-owned and municipal schools is free of charge for children seeking or granted international protection (Ministry of Education and Sciences, 2016), some obstacles are still in place. In the first place, many asylum-seekers arrive in Bulgaria with limited or no prior knowledge of Bulgarian, which significantly hinders their integration, including in the education system (UNHCR, 2023). In addition, slow and long administrative procedures are a prerequisite for refugees and asylum seekers’ inactivity, making conflicts more likely to happen (Stoenchev & Ganev, 2023).

Concomitantly, access to education for those granted temporary protection is facilitated to a certain extent by the addition of Article 68 of the Bulgarian Higher Education Act from 2024, which offers more relaxed admission conditions for people granted temporary protection in Bulgaria (Bulgarian Legal Portal, 2025). This, however, might be seen as a controversial issue, as educational opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers may vary according to one’s country of origin and legal status. This is evident from the rising number of Ukrainian children enrolled in Bulgarian schools. Their number in the 2021-2022 school year was 439 children, while in only two years it increased to 2,886 in the 2023-2024 academic year (Nikolova, 2024).

Some important features of the refugees-education opportunities nexus in Bulgaria may be assumed by the very number of asylum seekers since 2013 and their age structure (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of first-time asylum applications in Bulgaria between 2013-2024 and their age structure

| Year | Number of first-time asylum applications in Bulgaria | | | | | | |
|--------------|--|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Total | Less than 18 | | Between 18-34 | | Between 35-64 | |
| | | Number | % of total | Number | % of total | Number | % of total |
| 2013 | 6 980 | 2 195 | 31.45 % | 3 575 | 51.22 % | 1 165 | 16.69 % |
| 2014 | 10 805 | 3 305 | 30.59 % | 6 070 | 56.18 % | 1 390 | 12.86 % |
| 2015 | 20 160 | 5 470 | 27.13 % | 12 440 | 61.71 % | 2 185 | 10.84 % |
| 2016 | 18 990 | 6 530 | 34.39 % | 10 535 | 55.48 % | 1 835 | 9.66 % |
| 2017 | 3 470 | 1 140 | 32.85 % | 1 860 | 53.60 % | 455 | 13.11 % |
| 2018 | 2 465 | 830 | 33.67 % | 1 405 | 57.00 % | 225 | 9.13 % |
| 2019 | 2 075 | 710 | 34.22 % | 1 160 | 55.90 % | 195 | 9.40 % |
| 2020 | 3 460 | 1 105 | 31.94 % | 2 100 | 60.69 % | 250 | 7.23 % |
| 2021 | 10 890 | 3 700 | 33.98 % | 6 395 | 58.72 % | 780 | 7.16 % |
| 2022 | 20 260 | 5 085 | 25.10 % | 12 755 | 62.96 % | 2 315 | 11.43 % |
| 2023 | 22 390 | 5 675 | 25.35 % | 14 590 | 65.16 % | 2 095 | 9.36 % |
| 2024 | 12 130 | 4 005 | 33.02 % | 6 970 | 57.46 % | 1 135 | 9.36 % |
| Total | 134 075 | 39 750 | 29.65 % | 79 855 | 59.56 % | 14 025 | 10.46 % |

Source: Eurostat, 2025

As shown in Table 1, in the period 2013 – 2024, more than 70% of the asylum seekers in Bulgaria were aged over 18, that is, over the compulsory formal schooling age of 16 in the country. This demographic reality raises important considerations: although many arrive without a completed secondary or higher education or without proof of an educational degree, these asylum seekers are supposed to proactively choose on their own whether to pursue education or not, for there is no legal obligation for them to do so. Hence, it is to be highlighted the need for tailored adult education initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers in general.

Furthermore, individuals aged 18 to 34 represent the largest group, accounting for approximately 60% of all asylum seekers, followed by those under the age of 18 (30% of the total number of asylum seekers). A similar trend is observed among Ukrainian nationals granted temporary protection in Bulgaria, with the majority (64,485 individuals, or approximately 37.4% of them) falling within the 35–64 age group as of January 2024 (Eurostat, 2024).

Simultaneously, between 2013 and 2024, 80.3% of first-time asylum seekers in Bulgaria were men (Eurostat, 2025). However, this trend does not apply to Ukrainian nationals, as some 70.8% of those who have applied for protection in Bulgaria (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2025) were female, most likely due to the general mobilization of Ukrainian men since 24 February 2022.

The educational opportunities for newcomers also depend on their educational attainment upon arrival in the host country. In fact, most asylum seekers in Bulgaria had only primary or elementary education at the time of applying for asylum, while those with higher or semi-higher education were less than 10% in all the years considered (Fig. 1), even though more than 70% of all asylum seekers were aged over 18, as previously mentioned.

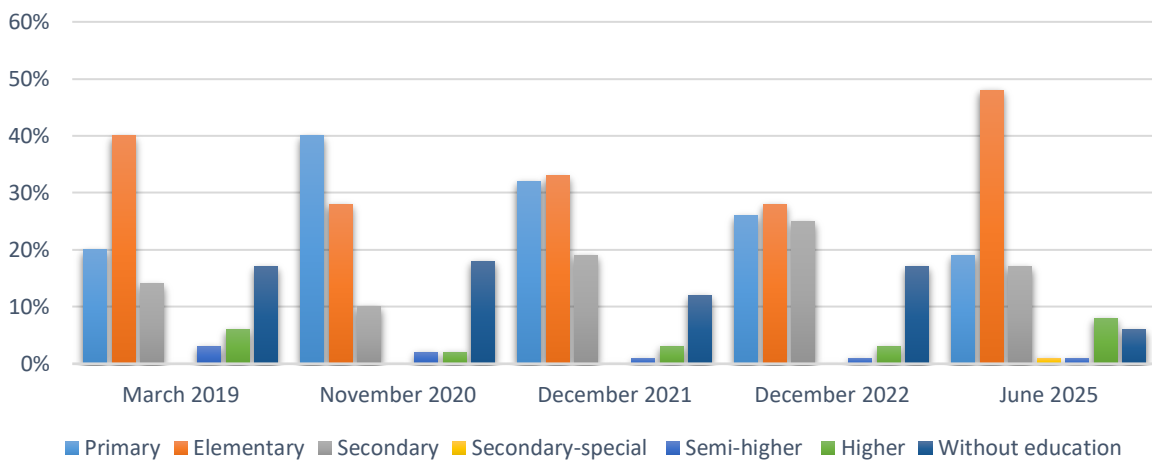


Figure 1. Education degree of asylum seekers over the age of 14 in the Republic of Bulgaria

Source: State Agency for Refugees, 2025

Such data may be interpreted as a major challenge for Bulgaria, as the low level of education attained by most asylum seekers suggests that the state will have to make significant efforts to include in the Bulgarian education system those granted international protection to make their integration in social and economic terms more likely. Concerning this, it is worth mentioning that years of schooling and educational attainment of parents may substantially affect children’s educational and behavioural outcomes, hence, the host state should introduce measures aimed at breaking such “*intergenerational social and societal chains of deprivation*” (Hartonen et al., 2021). The available data shows that the current levels of their enrolment are very low, as the total number of children seeking or receiving international protection enrolled in preschool education and schools in Bulgaria in the period 2015-2024 is 1 195 out of 34 560 (Ministry of Education and Sciences of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2025), which is approximately 3.5%. This raises concerns about the accessibility, outreach, and capacity of the country’s education system to address the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The political will and targeted state measures play a critical role, as evidenced in the case of Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria (Figure 2). Following the onset of the war in Ukraine, school enrolment among them increased from 1,552 in the 2022-2023 academic year to 4,797 in the 2024-2025 academic year. Similarly, the number of Ukrainian children enrolled in kindergartens more than doubled in the same period, rising from 527 to 1,274. While linguistic similarities and cultural affinity between Bulgarians and Ukrainians may facilitate integration to some extent, the most significant factor is the robust institutional support provided specifically to beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine, which is endorsed both at the national and EU levels.

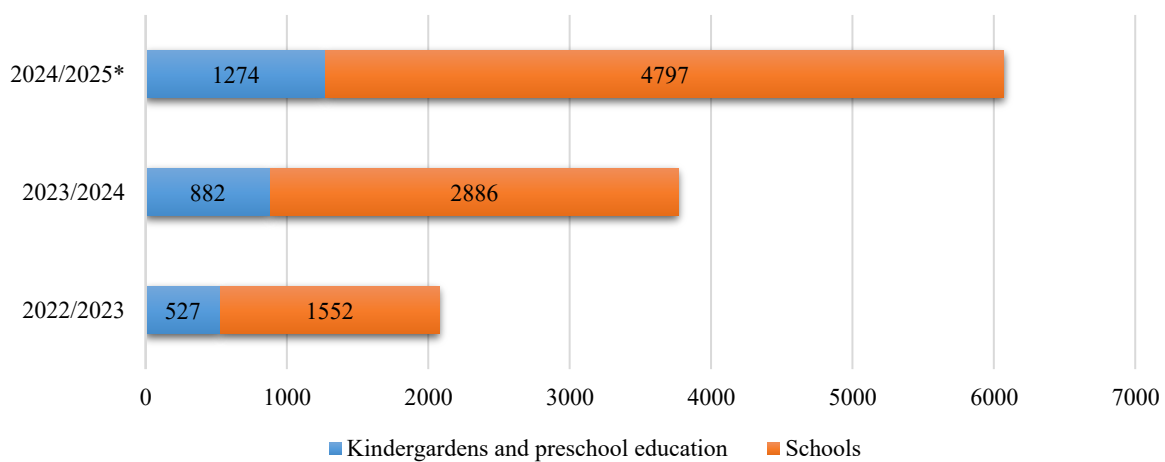


Figure 2. Information on the number of children receiving temporary protection enrolled in preschool education in kindergartens and schools in the country between 2022-2024

Source: Ministry of Education and Sciences

*As of 17 October 2024

Yet, the number of Ukrainian citizens under the age of 18 who are benefiting from temporary protection in Bulgaria strongly varies. In October 2022, that is, right after the beginning of the school year in the country, their number was 52,215, in October 2023 – 57,305, while in October 2024, the number dropped sharply to 16,850 (Eurostat, 2025). The initial increase likely reflects the ongoing displacement due to the war in Ukraine, while the sharp decline may indicate voluntary returns, onward migration to other EU countries, or changes in the international protection status. At the same time, it should be noted that it is not known the exact number of Ukrainians granted temporary international protection in Bulgaria who are enrolled in an online form of education, hosted by Ukrainian state institutions, and due to this, they do not attend Bulgarian schools. For example, according to

recent data approximately 185,000 Ukrainian children abroad are currently enrolled in the Ukrainian education system and learn in the form of remote or distance learning (Regional Technical Hub on Refugee Education, 2025).

Some of the challenges to Ukrainian refugee education in Bulgaria become apparent when certain features are compared to other countries within the EU. For example, in 2023, Bulgaria registered the highest share (23%) of Ukrainian refugee children and youth out of school among the EU Member States featured in the Refugee Response Plans for the Ukraine emergency, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia (UNHCR, 2024). In 2024, Bulgaria marked significant progress in this regard, however, the school attainment rate remained the second lowest (32%) after Romania (21%), while registering the highest share (38%) again of Ukrainian children and youth enrolled in remote/online form of education only (UNHCR, 2025b).

Although, language barriers are present in all of them, their approaches to the education integration of Ukrainian citizens vary, which is particularly evident when it comes to higher education. According to data a European Commission report on the inclusion of displaced children from Ukraine in EU education systems, in the academic year 2023-2024, Bulgaria was the only country where language barriers were reported as very challenging at this level of education attainment (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), 2024). As a matter of fact, in the 2024-2025 academic year, Ukrainian citizens represented one of the largest groups of foreign students in Bulgaria, with 2,104 students enrolled in universities in the country. However, most of them (1,287) were of Bulgarian descent and thus admitted under the legislation for foreign citizens of Bulgarian descent, while some were holding dual citizenship, including Bulgarian (BNR, 2025). In other words, the language barrier is apparent for many other prospective students, especially for refugees who are not of Bulgarian descent. In addition, both the state and the universities seem rather reluctant to ease the access to higher education for them, putting more efforts into attracting foreign citizens of Bulgarian descent, such as those from Ukraine, Moldova, and North Macedonia. Therefore, we argue that with the current state of targeted measures, the Bulgarian education system does not meet the needs of the beneficiaries of international protection in the country, and thus, a country with significant demographic challenges, such as, Bulgaria cannot seize all the economic and social opportunities that thousands of young people can bring to it.

Opportunities for the Bulgarian education system

Whilst many challenges come to the fore when it comes to refugee integration, including in the host country's education system, one should consider that apart from the clear humanitarian perspective, these go hand in hand with some opportunities as well. In the case of Bulgaria, such opportunities are associated with the demographic crisis the country is going through and the need for the development of better migration management, including the implementation of reception and integration measures. On the one hand, the number of children born in Bulgaria is constantly decreasing, and the same applies to students enrolled in higher education institutions. As a result, between 1991 and 2024, a total of 1,435 schools were closed down across the country, with the number of students enrolled in schools going down from 1,366,927 in 1991 to 658,299 in 2024 (Petrova, 2024). At the same time, the number of students enrolled in the Bulgarian higher education institutions in the 2013-2014 academic year was 272,200, while in the 2024-2025 academic year their number dropped to 203,517 (National Statistical Institute, 2025), marking roughly a 25% decline.

Against this background, the number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria would hardly solve the country's demographic crisis. Still, it certainly has the potential to boost the Bulgarian education system in terms of students enrolled, its internationalization, and the place of refugees and asylum seekers in it. This assumes an even greater importance considering the number of strategic documents that have been adopted at the national level such as, for example, the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training, and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021).

In addition, some advantages from an economic point of view should not be underestimated as well, particularly given the country's ageing population and labour shortages. However, any positive outcomes depend on the implementation in practice of timely and effective integration policies, including in the education system. As this is a prolonged and multifaceted process, it is necessary that strategic and targeted measures are put in place by various actors: primarily by the state, and then by international organizations, non-governmental actors, the academia, and volunteer networks working in close cooperation with the former.

Considering all the above, we assume that most refugee children experience pronounced educational disadvantages resulting from disrupted or limited prior education, as

evident from the data shown in Figure 1. This is an important feature, as compared to native-born students, refugee learners are usually disproportionately represented among those with lower skill levels, increasing the risk of their educational exclusion and hindering their integration into both the labour market and society. Also, with no targeted and sustained educational support provided, these students are also more susceptible to school dropouts (Crul et al., 2019) and face a greater likelihood of entering low-skilled and precarious employment. In the case of Bulgaria, all this would also mean that they might be easily regarded as an economic burden, especially in certain political discourses, since they will likely compete for a job with underqualified Bulgarian citizens and might need to be supported financially by the state. Therefore, addressing the educational disruptions and limited academic backgrounds of refugee students in Bulgaria is critical to enabling them to achieve parity with their peers and to fostering their long-term social and economic inclusion.

A telling example of how state policies can influence outcomes is the comparatively more proactive approach taken toward the Ukrainian citizens granted temporary protection in the country. Thus, legal amendments designed to facilitate entry, particularly into higher education, would be of great importance. Otherwise, differentiated treatment of refugees and asylum seekers based presumably on country of origin would not only risk reinforcing systemic inequalities but also lay the groundwork for social tension and perceptions of institutional discrimination among other refugee and asylum-seeking communities, with likely subsequent various outcomes, including in the security domain. The latter will easily translate into a political discourse, contributing to the entry and/or maintenance of a vicious circle from which the state and society do not gain, but can only lose, above all in the long term.

The role of the teacher should not be underestimated as well. Other European countries, such as Greece, have already implemented professional training (e.g. Teach4Integration programme) to empower thousands of teachers across the country with the aim of preparing them to better address challenges that students with refugee backgrounds face (European Commission, 2024). Given the current state policy in Bulgaria aimed at attracting more young people to pursue higher education in pedagogy, as well as the demographic realities and the regional security context, the university curriculum should consider these circumstances, reflecting the needs of refugees at various levels of education attainment.

Also, adequately determining the academic level of newly arrived students is essential for appropriate class placement, and early-stage and prompt assessments are critical to ensuring effective integration within the education system. In Sweden, for example, initial evaluations conducted within the first two months of schooling are pivotal for identifying students' academic competencies and language proficiency, thus enabling timely language support (Siarova & Essomba, 2014). An individualized approach is likewise implemented in Finland, where within the first year of arrival, each student is provided with a tailored curriculum reflecting their previous schooling, age, and other relevant factors, while implementing close collaboration among educators, students, and families (Dervin et al., 2017). Similar measures, such as introductory or preparatory classes, can be found in other EU countries as well, with the scope to bridge learning gaps and equip newly arrived non-native speaking students for integration into mainstream education, including through targeted academic and psychosocial support (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). Concerning this, language proficiency is critical for academic success and also fundamental to fostering a sense of belonging within the school and host state environment. Consequently, it may be more effective to integrate newly arrived students directly into mainstream classrooms, accompanied by focused language support, rather than isolating them in separate preparatory settings in RRCs, as is the case in Bulgaria.

In terms of the language of instruction, the Bulgarian higher education system gives more opportunities for the beneficiaries of international protection since many universities offer bachelor's and master's degree programmes entirely taught in English. Still, universities might implement a more tailored approach targeting refugees from their countries of origin or even transit countries, that is, before they enter the host country, and thus avoid certain legal challenges associated with possible illegal border crossings. In fact, similar measures have been recently introduced towards Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection in the country, in accordance with Decree 264 of 25 July 2024 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria (2024). In addition, such an approach will facilitate the internationalization of the Bulgarian universities, which was already pointed out as one of the weak characteristics and main challenges of the country's higher education system (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020, pp. 21-22). Also, it should not be underestimated that universities have a substantial degree of autonomy and therefore they can try to implement their own initiatives in this regard. This matter can be seen from the

perspective of the demographic processes in the country and around the world as well. It is estimated that in Africa only, the number of young Africans completing secondary or tertiary education will double between 2020 and 2040, reaching almost 240 million (OECD, 2024). Put simply, Bulgaria should seize the opportunities in the education field presented by asylum seekers and refugees, and not only by those on its territory.

CONCLUSION

The present study underscored systematic challenges facing the Bulgarian educational system in addressing the mixed migration inflows since 2013, which translates into missed opportunities as well. The different treatment of various groups of beneficiaries of international protection, exemplified by the relatively more inclusive and supportive measures afforded to Ukrainian nationals, raises some concerns, such as reinforcing structural inequalities and fostering long-term social fragmentation. The case of Bulgaria thus exemplifies how integration outcomes are not merely the result of demographic or cultural variables but are rather contingent upon political will and due to a lack of understanding about the contemporary geopolitical realities.

The integration of refugee children and youngsters into the Bulgarian education system remains hindered by structural barriers, inconsistent policy application, and a lack of sustained political commitment. While international examples demonstrate the effectiveness of early assessment, individualized support, and inclusive classroom practices, Bulgaria's presumably selective and fragmented approach creates risks of deepening inequalities. Thus, fostering equitable and comprehensive educational integration policies accessible to all individuals in need of international protection, regardless of nationality or origin, is imperative.

It is also necessary that central and local authorities aim to achieve long-term results as refugee integration, including in the education system, is not an immediate outcome, but a prolonged process demanding sustained institutional commitment and effort.

Finally, the research confirms that equitable access to education is not merely a humanitarian imperative but a cornerstone of sustainable integration. The findings reveal that the predominantly young male profile of asylum seekers in Bulgaria, coupled with their generally low educational background and interrupted schooling, substantially constrains

their integration into the Bulgarian education system, underscoring the need for tailored pedagogical and institutional responses. Failure to do so risks entrenching cycles of marginalization, with refugee integration in Bulgaria likely to have a very limited success, while continuing to be used by various political actors in trying to influence public opinion and hence, for serving certain political interests, including foreign ones.

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