



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION



# Integration of Refugee Children in the Bulgarian Educational System

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# Acronyms

<b>ECEC</b>	Early Childhood Education and Care
<b>EMIS</b>	Education Management System
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NSI</b>	National Statistical Institute
<b>MES</b>	Ministry of Education and Science
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment
<b>REA</b>	Regional Education Authority
<b>RRC</b>	Reception and Registration Centre
<b>SAR</b>	State Agency for Refugees
<b>(UASC)</b>	Unaccompanied and/or separated children
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund



# A WORD FROM THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE IN BULGARIA



**Seda Kuzucu**  
UNHCR Representative  
in Bulgaria

It is with great privilege and enthusiasm that I introduce this vital assessment, conducted by the National Education Research Institute in collaboration with the UNHCR Bulgaria team, focusing on the critical importance of ensuring children's access to inclusive classrooms, supportive peers, and compassionate teachers. As we navigate the complexities of refugee education, it is essential to underscore the immense socio-economic contributions refugees offer to the countries that shelter them and to the global community.

Education stands as a cornerstone of UNHCR's mission to assist governments in providing protection and solutions to forcibly displaced individuals and stateless populations. At the heart of our approach lies a commitment to child-centred policies and practices, where every child's unique needs, abilities, and aspirations guide educational endeavors. It is incumbent upon national education systems to cultivate environments where students feel safe, respected, and empowered, thereby

## Refugee education

UNHCR highlights a rights-based approach to the education of children and youth falling under the personal scope of its mandate – asylum-seekers, refugees, the stateless people and returnees. UNHCR considers free compulsory education as a key component for protection and solutions for them. Education promotes their cognitive development, emotional well-being, social skills, while also providing a sense of normalcy and stability during times of displacement. It plays a crucial role in integrating refugees into their host countries. Inclusive education can help asylum-seeking, refugee, stateless and returnee children learn the national or local language, culture, and norms. This empowers them to participate actively in society, and build a better future for themselves and their families.

UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education highlights the urgent need to ensure the integration of refugee children and youth and their continuous access to sustainable education. Global Refugee Compact (GRC) pinpoints education as a critical element of the international refugee response. Education Alliance as part of the Global Compact has allowed UNHCR to go beyond its supervisory responsibility on refugee law and establish partnerships with governments and international organizations to work towards quality inclusive education for refugee children and young people.

fostering their holistic development and well-being. UNHCR staunchly advocates for the inclusion of refugee children in national education systems as an inherent right, essential for their protection, empowerment, and future.

Our recently developed Refugee Education Strategy 2030<sup>1</sup> embodies this commitment, serving as a milestone document that underscores the urgent imperative of integrating refugee children and youth into sustainable education pathways. Aligned with global policy frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sustainable Development Goal 4, and the Global Compact on Refugees, this strategy outlines a vision for the active and sustainable inclusion of refugee learners in equitable, quality education systems. Through strategic partnerships, collaborative learning, capacity development, and innovative approaches, UNHCR aims to inspire collective action towards achieving inclusive education for all, irrespective of legal status, gender, learning needs, or disability.

#### **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)**

**Inclusive and Equitable Learning Opportunities:** UN Member States committed to promoting inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all, to share responsibility with the host countries and to improve access to education for refugee children.

**Access to Quality Education:** Access to quality education is crucial to the self-reliance of refugees. It is also central to the development of the communities that have welcomed them, and to the prosperity of their own countries once conditions are in place that allow them to return home.

**Higher-level Education:** Higher-level education turns students into leaders. It harnesses the creativity, energy, and idealism of refugee youth and young adults, casting them in the mold of role models, developing critical skills for decision-making, amplifying their voices, and enabling rapid generational change.

**Education Alliance:** The Education Alliance enables hosting states, donor states and organizations, civil society organizations, academics and academic institutions, United Nations agencies, and refugee-led organizations to work collaboratively in pledging actions that will promote the inclusion of refugee learners in national educational systems and institutions.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5d651da88d7.pdf>



In Bulgaria, UNHCR endeavors to enhance access to education for refugee children and youth by facilitating their integration into national education systems, fostering supportive learning environments, and expanding opportunities for sustainable futures. Our participatory assessments highlight the critical need for greater support to ensure that all children, regardless of their background or legal status, can access quality education. As we strive towards the 2030 goal of equitable education for all, it is imperative to forge stronger partnerships, amplify collaborative efforts, and address persistent challenges to refugee education integration.

This report by the Institute for Research in Education serves as a testament to the ongoing quest for inclusive policies and initiatives that prioritize the educational needs of refugee students in Bulgaria. By identifying gaps, offering viable recommendations, and advocating for broad solidarity and responsibility-sharing, this assessment contributes to a dialogue on achieving greater inclusiveness and accessibility in education. I am hopeful that this report will illuminate key issues and pave the way for actionable solutions that uphold the right to education for all children and youth, regardless of their circumstances.



# Executive Summary



*The integration and training center “INTEGRIKO” is a project developed in partnership with UNHCR Bulgaria. In it, Ukrainian children receive support to help them integrate faster into the Bulgarian education system. ©UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov*

Bulgaria has experienced significant increase in the number of asylum-seeking and refugee children and youth in recent years. In 2022, the number of children and youth (ages 0-17) applying for international protection surged by 37.5%, totalling 5,080 applications, a notable increase from the previous year. One in every four individuals seeking international protection in Bulgaria during 2022 was a child, and 36% of these children were below the age of 14. In addition, Bulgaria experienced a massive arrival of refugees displaced from Ukraine, with the total number of Ukrainian children and youth registered with temporary protection in Bulgaria reaching 52,688 as of December 2022.

UNHCR’s Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education places strong emphasis on actively integrating refugee learners into national education systems. This involves promoting equitable and sustainable inclusion for displaced children and youth, fostering safe and supportive learning environments for all students regardless of legal status, gender, or disability, and empowering learners to leverage their education for sustainable futures. In alignment with this objective, Bulgaria has undertaken significant efforts in recent years to support the educational access of displaced children and young individuals in local schools. However, the increasing arrival of asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria has posed

significant challenges for the Bulgarian education system, necessitating effective accommodation and integration of a diverse group of children with different nationality, culture, language, socio-economic status, and prior educational experiences.

Effectively integrating refugee students into the Bulgarian school system requires customized policies and practices that cater to their varied educational, social, and emotional needs. With a growing number of children seeking international protection coming from countries with prolonged military conflicts, significant educational disruptions and psychological trauma are common. Closing the existing learning gaps and effective adaptation to the Bulgarian educational framework are pivotal in adequately meeting their requirements. Additionally, addressing their social and emotional needs entails creating a secure learning environment, encouraging interactions among peers and teachers, fostering a sense of belonging, and helping them cope with the trauma. Prioritizing efforts to navigate these demands is indispensable for facilitating students' adjustment and fostering optimal learning outcomes.

Mastering Bulgarian while preserving their native language is vital for integration of refugee students. However, learning the Bulgarian language is just one aspect of a multifaceted educational process that must tackle the consequences of disrupted schooling. This includes bridging gaps in cognitive skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy, fostering understanding of scientific concepts and subject knowledge, helping students cope with learning, and adapting to school culture. Recent years have witnessed a significant decrease in the average length of stay for refugee children, typically ranging from 5-6 months to a year. This short-term perspective often contributes to low enrollment rates in Bulgarian schools, lack of motivation for learning Bulgarian, and high dropout rates among refugee children. The high number of unaccompanied children and youth also necessitates more specific efforts for their school enrollment and retention.

This study was conducted by the Institute for Research in Education on behalf of the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria. It examines the integration of refugee and asylum seeking children within Bulgaria's national educational system, considering the influence of policies, practices, and individual and family circumstances. By employing a comprehensive theoretical model, it explores the key needs of refugee students and the factors that affect their integration into the Bulgarian education system. Combining quantitative data obtained from public sources and government agencies with qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups, and site visits, the study identifies and maps existing challenges in terms of access and effective participation in education. Moreover, it provides specific policy recommendations to stakeholders to enhance the educational integration of asylum-seekers and refugees, aiming to facilitate their successful integration into the Bulgarian educational system.

## Data for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

The availability, accessibility and proper use of data are essential for creating inclusive education systems that cater to the needs of vulnerable groups, such as asylum-seeking and refugee children and youth. Despite the growing importance of the topic in Bulgaria, there is a lack of comprehensive and policy-relevant research on the educational integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children and youth. Existing studies and data are often limited and fragmented, with information for these demographics poorly integrated into national statistical frameworks. Additionally, data related to the access to and participation in education by refugee children are frequently inaccessible to the public and inconsistently disclosed.

Furthermore, critical aspects such as absenteeism, dropout rates, additional support requirements, and language training data are not consistently collected. Moreover, it remains uncertain to what extent the available data is systematically utilized to monitor the participation and academic outcomes of this student demographic.

The lack of integration between the information systems of Ministry of Education and Science and State Agency for Refugees further hampers monitoring and understanding the educational integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children and youth. The scarcity of structured data hinders the ability to monitor progress, inform policies, and implement targeted efforts to support the effective integration of these children into the education system.

Comprehensive information supporting an examination of pre- and post-migration factors, as well as individual circumstances, is crucial for understanding refugee students' specific needs and providing appropriate educational support. Bulgaria could benefit from establishing standards for structured refugee education data collection and improving data-sharing arrangements across institutions. These standards need to include disaggregated data on refugee education by refugee status, age, gender, disability, education attainment, and country of origin. Collecting information on family background and parental education is also important, considering the substantial influence of the background characteristics on successful integration and advancement within the education system. Expanding monitoring indicators beyond enrollment to include dropout rates, retention rates, learning difficulties, and support measures would provide a more comprehensive assessment of refugee children's learning and development, informing education responses and addressing their specific educational needs effectively.

## Access to Education

Bulgaria has provided asylum-seeking and refugee children and youth with unobstructed access to the national education system on equal terms as Bulgarian nationals. The simplified enrollment procedure allows for free admission of asylum-seeking and refugee children in public kindergartens and schools throughout the school year. This approach involves distributing refugee students among a larger number of schools to prevent segregation, promote interactions with their Bulgarian peers, and facilitate their integration.

Despite the availability of educational opportunities, significant challenges persist in ensuring the enrollment and regular attendance of a considerable number of pre-school and school-aged refugee children. The survey results indicate very limited participation of asylum-seeking and refugee children in pre-school programs. Underlying reasons include a lack of information and parental reluctance towards pre-school programs due to limited familiarity and experience with such programs; difficulties in meeting vaccination requirements, limited availability of places in public kindergartens in some areas, limited interest due to aspirations of settling in another country, and barriers such as poverty, transportation, language, and safety concerns.

The available data indicates a significant number of asylum-seeking and refugee children with international protection, as well as Ukrainian children with temporary protection, are not enrolled in Bulgarian schools. Many newly arrived children of compulsory school age are not attending school, with only a small portion being enrolled in the same academic year. Most enrolled students with international protection are in primary and lower secondary education, while fewer are in upper secondary education. There is a high turnover among these students, with many not continuing their education in the following academic year. While detailed data is lacking, the study's findings strongly suggest that unaccompanied children face significant barriers to accessing compulsory education. Feedback indicates that most of these children are either not enrolled in school or drop out shortly after enrollment, often experiencing difficulties with academic performance. Only a small fraction of unaccompanied children successfully advance to the next grade. Additionally, enrollment of 16-17-year-old asylum-seeking and refugee students in the non-compulsory second stage of upper secondary education is very low, indicating that efforts for educational integration generally exclude this age group.

Despite legal provisions for ensuring access to education for asylum-seeking and refugee students, significant barriers to enrollment persist, including reluctance of families to enroll their children due to short stays in Bulgaria or access to distance education in their home country; disrupted education, leading to learning gaps and disinterest in schooling; language barriers and limited ability to navigate the education system; limitations in local educational

infrastructure; safety concerns and economic hardships hindering access to schooling; problems with legal status leading to school attendance issues; and limited enforcement mechanisms to encourage enrolment and attendance.

Bulgaria could benefit from adopting a more comprehensive approach, integrating economic, social, educational, and health-related interventions to enhance the enrollment of refugee children in preschool and school education. Proposed actions include increasing awareness, offering practical support and guidance to parents, addressing parental concerns and misconceptions, fostering culturally inclusive environments in schools, providing flexible learning options, enhancing monitoring of enrollment and student performance, and providing ongoing support to ensure regular school attendance and address any issues that arise. Strengthening linkages between schools and critical public services through effective coordination mechanisms, such as interagency working groups, is essential for joint planning, resource-sharing, and information exchange. Moreover, developing mechanisms for seamless information sharing and referrals among service providers is crucial to support the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children into the education system effectively.

### **Addressing Learning Needs**

Bulgaria has adopted a model of direct immersion in education for refugee children and youth, placing them directly into mainstream classes. The chosen model is believed to offer several advantages. Firstly, it facilitates the development of language skills by exposing students directly to the Bulgarian language. Secondly, integration into regular educational settings could foster social integration through interaction with Bulgarian peers, promoting friendships and a sense of belonging. Thirdly, access to regular educational programs ensures adherence to the standard curriculum and academic progress in line with peers.

In practice, survey results indicate that positive outcomes have been observed for younger refugee students in terms of Bulgarian language learning and academic progress. However, concerns arise regarding the readiness and potential dropout rates of unprepared refugee children, especially older students and unaccompanied children. Many refugee children are able to read and write in Bulgarian, but comprehension remains a challenge. Challenges in implementing the immersion model include limited availability of appropriate teaching aids, teachers' limited experience in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language, insufficient time or irregular provision of additional Bulgarian language training, limited access to extra support for refugee students facing learning difficulties, and the complexity of Bulgarian curricula.

Accurately assessing the prior knowledge and competencies of asylum-seeking and refugee students upon entering the education system is crucial for their successful integration.

Bulgaria lacks top-level policies for determining the educational and personal needs of newly arrived learners. The study findings suggest varying approaches in determining learning needs and grade placements, often relying on basic information and lacking comprehensive assessments. The current mechanism allows for fast inclusion but poses high risks of inadequate placement, hindering integration, diminishing motivation, and increasing dropout rates. Placing students in lower grade levels can be demoralizing, while high-ability students may experience delays in their academic progress.

Bulgaria has introduced a model for providing Bulgarian language training to asylum-seeking and refugee students that integrates language learning with the regular curriculum and offers additional support as needed. Feedback from teachers and school principals indicates that younger refugee students typically acquire verbal skills in Bulgarian and can communicate effectively in school. However, survey findings also indicate that the current practices for providing additional training in Bulgarian language may present significant challenges for the development of cognitive academic language proficiency among refugee students, particularly older students and those with languages vastly different from Bulgarian, limited or interrupted prior schooling, and lacking literacy in their first language. The instruction hours allocated for additional language training are often insufficient and below the maximum hours recommended. The provision of language classes is often inconsistent, which hampers effective language learning, especially for students whose native languages differ significantly from Bulgarian. Provision of quality education for refugee students requires qualified teachers specifically trained in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign or second language, as well as possessing enhanced skills to deliver subject-specific instruction effectively to those for whom Bulgarian is not their native language. However, the study indicates that teachers frequently lack sufficient initial training and ongoing professional development opportunities, compelling them to depend on their own skills and resources. The limited access to age-appropriate teaching aids designed for studying Bulgarian as a foreign language and established methodologies for teaching non-native speakers also hinder effective teaching. Personal and contextual factors, such as lack of motivation and parental language support, further impact language acquisition.

Overall, the study findings highlight that the lack of fluency in Bulgarian significantly hampers the academic performance and overall well-being of asylum-seeking and refugee students. Existing language barriers pose significant difficulties for refugee students in understanding academic material, especially in subjects that involve culturally or socially unfamiliar concepts. Additionally, language barriers exacerbate other obstacles such as late-age immigration, disrupted or limited prior schooling, and lack of parental support. Moreover, the limited opportunities for older students to attain proficient Bulgarian language skills at an academic level may hinder their participation in tertiary education, as it affects their ability to achieve



high scores in national matriculation exams.

In addition to the language barrier, the academic progress of refugee children in Bulgaria encounters a significant obstacle due to the inflexible focus of Bulgarian curricula on delivering subject knowledge tailored to a homogeneous group of students. This approach may not effectively address the diverse needs of refugee or asylum-seeking children. The variations in national curricula and quality of instruction between the countries of origin and Bulgaria also contributes to discrepancies in academic readiness. Yet, currently, there are no adequate mechanisms in place to provide individualized plans or flexible educational programs to accommodate the diverse needs of these students. Moreover, the study findings highlight that refugee students have better learning outcomes and make progress when they can leverage their prior knowledge and are consistently challenged to advance. Nonetheless, the current practices for ongoing monitoring and assessment of learning across schools and teachers are inconsistent.

To address the learning needs of refugee students, Bulgaria could consider adopting more comprehensive policies and procedures for the initial assessment of the prior knowledge and competencies of newly arrived refugee students, in alignment with EU practices. Moreover, the country could embrace a more holistic language learning approach that considers the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of refugee students, extending beyond mere instruction in vocabulary and grammar to encompass strategies for achieving cognitive academic language proficiency across various subjects. Equipping teachers with culturally and age-appropriate tools for ongoing monitoring and assessment can empower them to effectively identify the language and learning support needs of individual students.

Bulgaria may also consider implementing specialized catch-up, bridging, or accelerated education programs specifically designed for asylum-seeking or refugee students. Research suggests that the likelihood of refugee students staying in school and making progress increases significantly with access to such programs. A preparatory language-focused program could be especially beneficial for lower and upper secondary school students, as they require substantial language training to excel in content courses. Exploring the idea of summer camps, as successful experiences in other countries, could help develop students' proficiency in Bulgarian and bridge subject knowledge gaps.

Bulgaria could also explore the possibility of creating individualized development and learning plans for asylum-seeking and refugee students who enter the Bulgarian education system. This may involve adapting the curriculum and offering separate educational programs, initially focusing on intensive language training before gradually integrating other subjects like mathematics, geography, and history.

It is crucial to provide specialized teacher training programs, either during their initial studies

or through in-service training, to ensure educators possess the requisite knowledge and competencies to effectively teach non-native speakers in their classrooms. Additionally, regular monitoring and evaluation of policies and practices aimed at addressing the educational needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children are vital for ensuring their optimal educational outcomes and integration into schools.

### **Addressing Social Needs**

The survey findings reveal that asylum-seeking and refugee children generally encounter positive social interactions in Bulgarian schools. Principals and teachers emphasize efforts to foster inclusion by strengthening connections to schools, respecting culture, and creating inclusive environments. Younger students appear to adapt more readily socially, whereas older ones encounter greater challenges. The language barrier is a significant obstacle to both learning and social integration, limiting communication opportunities. Many refugee students feel isolated or tend to self-isolate, especially girls wearing hijab, who perceive their religious beliefs are not respected. While no significant cases of bullying or violence in schools are reported, heightened aggression is noted in reception center premises. Some teachers may lack the necessary training to effectively support refugee children's social integration, leading to instances of isolation or lack of intervention in exclusion or bullying. Anecdotal examples from participants and refugee children highlight instances of social exclusion or neglect in the classroom, reflecting the need for improved teacher training and support for refugee students' social integration.

Schools can enhance social integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children and youth through initiatives like mentorship programs, buddy systems, and community engagement activities. Efforts should also focus on preventing discrimination and bullying by improving school climates, enhancing teacher readiness, and addressing incidents promptly. Policymakers can support an inclusive environment by facilitating extracurricular activities that aid language development, social integration, and well-being. Collaborations with local organizations and NGOs can offer diverse activities reflecting refugee children's interests and cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging and support.

### **Addressing Emotional Needs**

Refugee children often face trauma, hindering their learning abilities, with higher rates of mental health disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Bulgaria offers hotlines for psychological assistance but lacks specific policies for evaluating psychosocial support needs of refugee students. Interviews reveal that traumatized refugee

students may show signs of distraction, isolation, and academic setbacks. While schools offer free psychological support, they lack effective screening tools and structured practices to address refugee students' trauma. The topic of trauma is often overlooked in schools and teachers often feel unequipped to handle trauma-related issues. Overall, there's a need for better-equipped schools and teacher training to effectively support the mental health of refugee students.

To further support the psychosocial needs of refugee students, Bulgaria could consider implementing mobile/intervention teams of experts to assist schools and teachers. Customized tools and screening mechanisms, along with guidelines and instructions, could help schools identify and address the emotional needs of refugee students. Targeted teacher training should be provided to raise awareness of the impact of the refugee experience on learning and behaviour and to equip teachers with strategies for addressing emotional barriers to learning.

## **Parental Engagement**

Parental engagement plays a vital role in the academic, social, and emotional success of asylum-seeking and refugee students, as indicated by various studies. Parents who offer strategic direction, support their children's education, and value learning can significantly aid their integration into the host country's school system. However, challenges such as trauma, language barriers, and cultural differences may hinder parental involvement. Proficiency in the host country's language, education level, and time availability impact parental support for learning. The study highlights that the Ukrainian parents are often highly engaged due to their education level and language skills, while Middle Eastern parents may face barriers due to language and literacy issues. At the same time, practices for involving parents are fragmented, including meetings at reception centers, open days at schools and utilizing educational mediators. Overall, there are limited opportunities for parents to interact and integrate into the school community, with much of this work falling on the non-governmental sector.

To promote parental engagement and facilitate children's integration, Bulgaria could expand the responsibilities of educational mediators. Additionally, encouraging active community group support can be beneficial for engaging parents with low literacy levels. By fostering collaborations among schools, parents, non-governmental organizations, and other community partners, a supportive ecosystem can be created to promote Bulgarian language learning and provide necessary educational support for students to excel academically.

## Unaccompanied and/or Separated Children

The integration of unaccompanied and/or separated children requires focused attention and targeted interventions due to their unique challenges. Providing education, care, and psychosocial support during the asylum and resettlement process is crucial for their well-being and educational attainment. However, Bulgaria lacks a specific monitoring process for their access to education, resulting in a lack of detailed data. Study results suggest that many unaccompanied children in Bulgaria lack access to education and show little interest in enrolling, with a high risk of dropping out even among those who do enroll. Challenges such as a lack of motivation, family support, language barriers, and the absence of orientation and mentorship contribute to their disengagement. There are indications that placing unaccompanied boys in reception centres operated by the State Agency for Refugees may hinder their participation in education and integration. However, cases of successful integration have been observed among children accommodated in family-type centres, where they choose to stay in Bulgaria, enroll in school, and learn the language.

The study highlights the importance of establishing a collaborative and systematic approach to monitor the enrollment of unaccompanied and/or separated children in Bulgaria's education system. This data will allow policymakers and stakeholders to develop targeted integration strategies that address the underlying factors contributing to increasing numbers of unaccompanied boys seeking international protection in Bulgaria. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations are crucial to developing inclusive policies and initiatives to safeguard and assist unaccompanied and separated children, with a specific focus on unaccompanied boys. Such customized interventions should encompass the development of dedicated support programs designed to address their mental health, educational, and social integration requirements. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Science may develop a special funding program to support linguistic and inclusion school-based activities targeting both unaccompanied children and newly arrived students. Finally, vocational education may offer a viable pathway for adolescent unaccompanied boys to remain in Bulgaria and lead a fulfilling life.

# Introduction



*Lyudmila conducts a class with children at the Integriko centre in Varna.  
©UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov*

Access to education stands as one of the most influential means of fostering resilience and empowerment within refugee communities. UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education places strong emphasis on actively integrating refugee learners into national education systems by promoting equitable and sustainable inclusion for displaced children and youth, fostering safe and supportive learning environments for all students regardless of legal status, gender, or disability, and empowering learners to leverage their education for sustainable futures. It highlights the urgent need to ensure their integration and access to quality education throughout all phases of displacement, through traditional and innovative delivery models, and across the full continuum of formal and non-formal education programme opportunities.

European countries have made significant efforts to support the educational access of displaced children and young individuals in local schools. However, they also encounter challenges that may hinder the integration of these learners. To mitigate the existing risks, the European Commission also emphasizes the significance of adopting a comprehensive approach to integrate refugee learners.

Bulgaria has witnessed a notable increase in the number of asylum-seeking and refugee children in recent years. The increased number of asylum-seekers and refugees arriving from the Middle East and South Asian countries like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the significant number of Ukrainian refugees, has put considerable pressure on Bulgaria's education system to promptly and effectively accommodate and integrate a large number of children with diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, culture, language, socio-economic status, and educational experience. Meeting the unique learning, social, and emotional needs of these children and providing appropriate educational support has become crucial. In addition to providing immediate support and access to education for children and young people entering the country, education authorities are faced with the challenge of facilitating their integration within schools in order to promote their academic outcomes, social and emotional wellbeing. However, the policy-relevant data and research that specifically focuses on the educational integration of refugee children and adolescents in Bulgaria is still limited.

This study was conducted by the Institute for Research in Education on behalf of the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria. It explores various facets of the integration of refugee children within the Bulgarian national educational system. The study aims to shed light on how various policies and practices, along with individual and family circumstances, influence the educational integration of refugee children in Bulgaria. Employing a comprehensive model of integration in education, derived from an extensive literature review, it investigates the crucial needs of refugee students and the factors that facilitate or hinder their integration into the Bulgarian educational system.

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the study identifies and maps existing challenges related to access to and effective participation in education, and provides targeted policy recommendations to stakeholders for improving the educational integration of asylum-seekers and refugees.

# Theoretical Framework

The successful integration of refugee students into the education system of their host country is crucial for their academic outcomes, as well as their social and emotional well-being. This integration process is complex and multidimensional, involving various policy domains and requiring systematic and holistic approaches. Various individual, interpersonal and institutional factors can shape the educational needs and academic results of refugee students. Having high academic and life ambitions, accurate educational assessment and grade placement, teachers who understand the linguistic and cultural heritage of the children, culturally appropriate school transitions, supportive peer relationships, parental involvement in education, a cohesive and supportive home environment, and successful acculturation are among the key factors that contribute to their success in education. On the other hand, there are important risk factors that can lead to learning problems and hinder the integration process. These risk factors include teacher stereotyping and low expectations, bullying and racial discrimination, trauma experienced before and after migration, misunderstandings among parents about the educational system of the host country, and lack of parental support. Addressing these risk factors and promoting the success factors through comprehensive and inclusive policies and practices can greatly contribute to the positive educational outcomes and overall well-being of refugee students in the host country's educational system. It requires collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including schools, policymakers, educators, parents, and communities, to create a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters the educational success and integration of refugee students. (OECD, 2015, 2018; 2021, 2022; Fratzke, 2017; Fazel, 2018; Crul et al, 2019; Eurydice, 2022; Hammond et al. 2022).

This study builds on a theoretical model of educational integration of refugee students proposed by Lucie Cerna (OECD)<sup>2</sup>, which is adapted for the Bulgarian context (Figure 1). It implies that educational integration of refugee children can take place if all (or at least most) of their educational, social and emotional needs are met.

First, successful integration in the Bulgarian school system requires policies and practices that provide for meeting a whole range of educational needs of refugee students. They need to learn the Bulgarian language in order to understand the instruction and succeed in school, while also having the opportunity to develop their native language if they want to do so. As many of these children originate from countries where access to formal schooling was limited or interrupted, have spent prolonged periods outside school, or have never attended

<sup>2</sup> Cerna (2019).

school, they need to catch up, to overcome any illiteracy and to adjust to the educational process at Bulgarian schools. This means that Bulgarian language learning is only one facet of a much more complex educational process which has to address the gaps resulting from disrupted schooling: bridging gaps in cognitive skills (e.g. reading, writing and numeracy skills), understanding of scientific concepts and subject knowledge, and coping with classroom material. They also need to adapt to the local educational system and school culture, including norms of behaviour, organisation of the education process, school climate, etc. Without intensive training to catch up and adapt to local schooling norms, refugee students with insufficient or no prior education are more likely to drop out of school (OECD, 2015; Cerna, 2019).

Second, successful integration requires different policies and practices to address the social needs of refugee students. This involves providing refugee students with a safe place for learning and opportunities to interact with their peers and teachers, engage in social activities, develop a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community, and build a strong personal identity (Cerna, 2019; Hammond et.al, 2022). Establishing productive communication is considered an important step before refugee students begin their academic studies and is an important factor in meeting their social and emotional needs. The higher degree of perceived support from classmates is associated with better psychological functioning and better school integration. At the same time, forced displacement negatively affects the way refugee children can communicate - they often find it difficult to be understood, are unable to express their needs adequately, and others cannot understand or interpret their messages. Moreover, due to the separation from friends and classmates, refugee children have a strong need to make new friends and feel a sense of belonging to a new community and school, while many of them feel alienated because of cultural and other differences. All this can have a significant impact on their sense of belonging and emotional and behavioural engagement with school and learning.

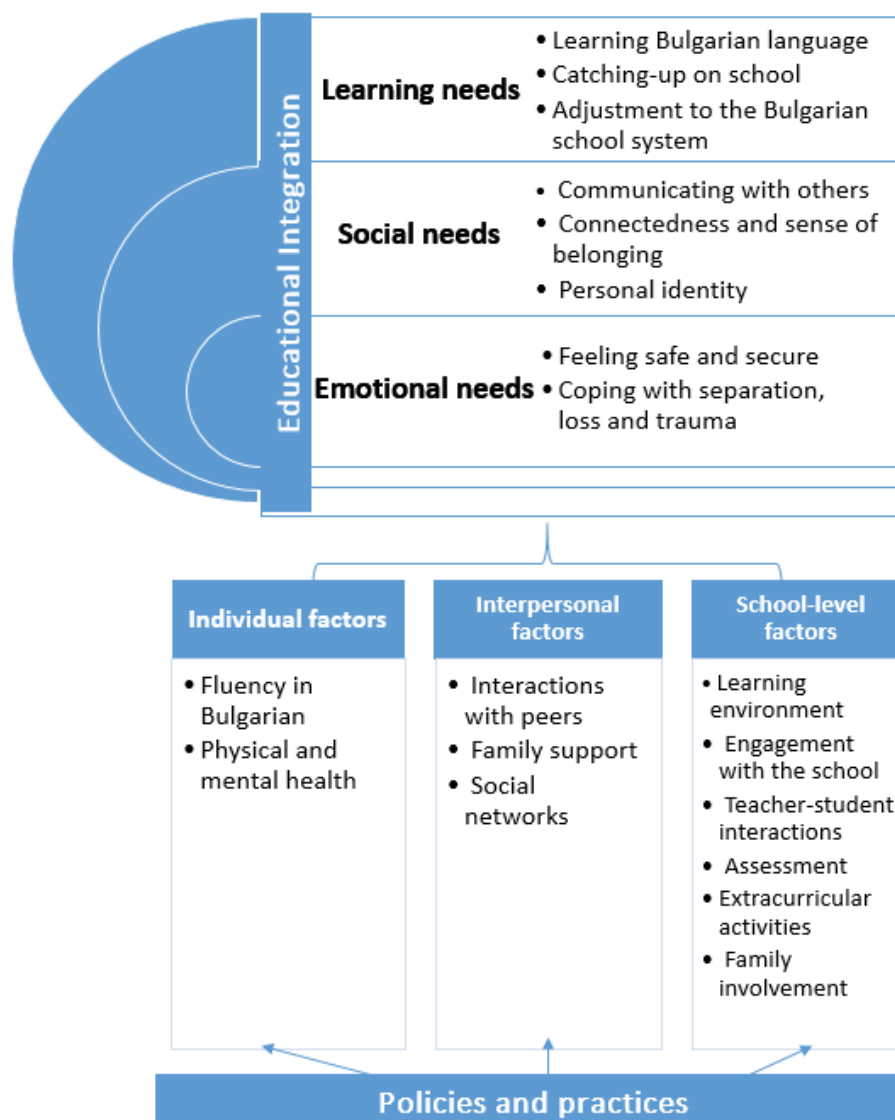
Third, many refugee children and young people have been exposed to severe traumatic events prior to arriving in Bulgaria and need to feel safe and be able to cope with loss, grief and trauma. Many children may suffer from emotional and mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (especially among unaccompanied children), anxiety, depression or behavioral disorders. This can seriously affect their lives and their chances of integrating into the host society. Alongside this, refugee students often face parents' misunderstanding/underestimation of the role of education, teachers' low expectations of them, discrimination, etc., which can lead to additional emotional and behavioural problems that make teaching and learning difficult. Some of them may face discrimination, violence, and bullying in host country schools, including social exclusion, physical harassment, unfair treatment, racial slurs and intellectual belittling. Adequate care and provision of psychosocial



support during the asylum and resettlement phase, prove to be of fundamental importance for young refugees' mental health, psychosocial adjustment and educational achievement (Pastoor, 2017). Schools can play a crucial role in mitigating emotional and psychological hardship, offering inclusive learning environments, safe spaces, positive interactions and psychological support (Cerna, 2019).

The success of all integration efforts is highly dependent on the availability of well-prepared teachers who can work effectively in a multicultural environment; consider the individual needs of their students in their teaching approaches; create an inclusive classroom environment; encourage their students; have high expectations of their abilities; and support them to achieve high results. Parental support and stability of the family environment are also associated with better integration into school, better academic performance and overall well-being (OECD, 2021, 2022). Refugee children are more likely to integrate into school if they come from cultures that place a high value on education and their families are willing to support their learning. Parents' proficiency in the language of the host country and level of education have a significant effect on their capacity to support their children's learning.

Figure 1. Holistic model for the educational integration of refugee students in Bulgaria



Source: Adapted from Cerna (2019)

# Method

This survey is focused on investigating the educational integration of two groups of refugee children and young people: (1) refugee and asylum-seeking students displaced mainly from Middle East and Asian countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, constitute longer-term inflows in Bulgaria and (2) refugee and asylum-seeking students displaced from Ukraine as a result of Russia invasion in February 2022. Such a grouping is intended to provide for capturing the diverse and complex educational and psychological needs stemming from the fact, that the refugee children are not a homogenous group and have very different background characteristics and needs, influencing their integration, including:

- **Different educational experiences and gaps.** Children coming from Middle East and South Asian countries with a long history of military conflicts and/or humanitarian crises (such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.) have often spent long periods out of school or in refugee camps or reception centres (most often in Türkiye). Many of them have limited or no education; moreover, their parents are often poorly educated or uneducated and have limited ability to support their children academically. In contrast, children from Ukraine do not have significant educational gaps, and many of them attended online classes organized by their Ukrainian schools immediately after arriving in Bulgaria.
- **Different refugee status and territorial distribution.** In the vast majority of cases, refugee children from Ukraine residing on the territory of Bulgaria are granted temporary protection, while children from other countries seek or have been granted international protection. The refugee children coming from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and their families, are often concentrated in the reception centres of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) in Sofia and Haskovo, while Ukrainian children are more dispersed within the country, with the highest concentration in two Black Sea districts (Burgas and Varna), as well as in the districts of Sofia-city and Plovdiv. While the schools around the SAR's centres in Sofia and Haskovo have a long track record in enrolling refugee students, the arrival of large number of refugees from Ukraine in different regions imposed completely new challenges to the local school systems across the country.

- **Different language needs.** Arabian or Farsi languages are of completely different linguistic families related to the Bulgarian language and students speaking these languages need considerably more training and support to overcome the language-related disadvantage. In contrast, Ukrainian and Bulgarian languages are closer (both using the Cyrillic alphabet), many Ukrainian students speak Russian which is of a close linguistic family to the Bulgarian language and these students need less time and support to become proficient speakers.

The study utilizes a combination of quantitative data obtained from public sources or provided upon request from the Ministry of Education and Science and the State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers, as well as qualitative data collected through online meetings and site visits to schools, MES, and one of the SAR's reception centres. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews with school principals and teachers, representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science and State Agency for Refugees, UNICEF, social workers and community partners, and refugee children. More specifically, the team investigated the integration practices in two schools – one school with a concentration of refugee students from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and one school with a concentration of refugee students from Ukraine by the means of in-depth interviews with school principals and a focus group with teachers. A series of in-depth interviews and focus groups have been organized with community partners/social workers, working with asylum-seeking and refugee children accommodated in SAR's reception centres in Sofia and Haskovo or residing on private addresses. One focus group and two semi-structured interviews have been organized with refugee children aged 7-15.

In addition, the report draws from secondary information acquired through extensive desk research of various documentary sources, including national and international studies related to the topic of educational integration of refugee children.

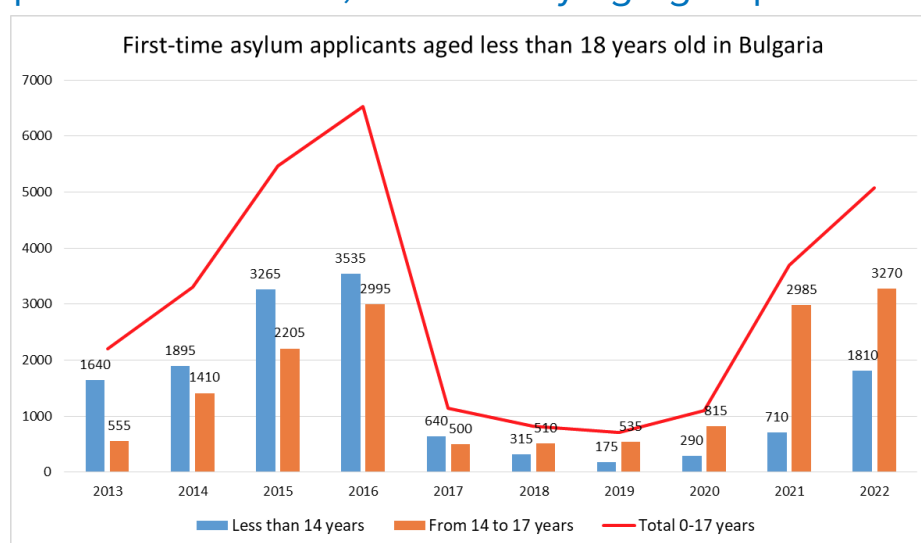
# School-Age Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children in Bulgaria

## Recent Trends in Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Flows

Bulgaria has experienced an intensified arrival of asylum-seekers and refugee children in recent years. Some 5,080 children lodged an asylum application for international protection in 2022, an increase of 37.5% compared the previous year. In fact, every forth applicant for international protection that entered Bulgaria in 2022, was a child. Some 36% of these children were younger than 14 years (Figure 2)<sup>3</sup>.

The largest groups of children and young people seeking international protection in Bulgaria originated from the Syrian Arab Republic (48%) and Afghanistan (36%). In 2022, there were 548 children from Ukraine seeking international protection, or 10.8% of all first-time applicants for international protection, in addition to the huge number of Ukrainian children seeking and receiving temporary protection (see Table 1).

**Figure 2. Arrival of asylum-seeking children in Bulgaria for the period 2013-2022, total and by age groups**

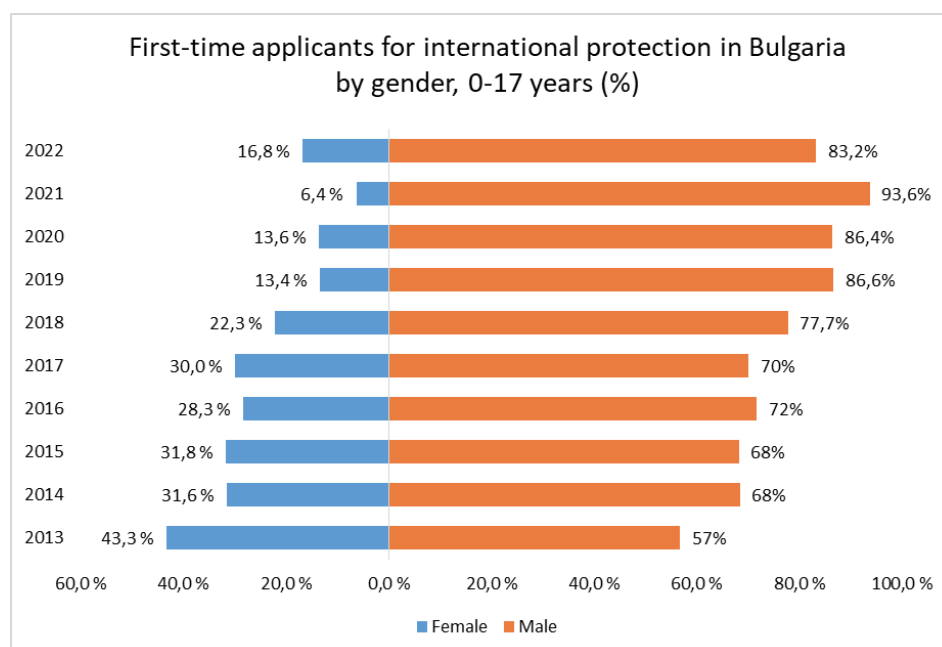


Source: Eurostat (migr\_asyappctza)

<sup>3</sup> The significantly lower numbers of asylum applications in 2019 and 2020 may be explained to a large extent by the movement restrictions and border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the proportion of boys seeking international protection steadily increased in recent years, reaching 94% of all children who arrived in Bulgaria in 2021 and 83% of those who lodged an asylum application in 2022. At the same time, the percentage of asylum-seeking girls arriving in Bulgaria is decreasing - from 43% in 2013 to as low as 6% in 2021 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Structure by gender of first-time applicants for international protection in Bulgaria for the period 2013-2022 (age group 0-17 years)**



Source: Eurostat (*migr\_asyappctza*)

In addition to the increasing numbers of foreign-born children seeking international protection, in 2022 Bulgaria experienced a massive arrival of refugee children and youth displaced from Ukraine as a consequence of Russia's invasion and seeking temporary protection, thus creating challenges for policy-making to respond quickly and address the needs of these vulnerable groups of children in the most appropriate manner. According to data provided by the SAR, the total number of Ukrainian children registered with temporary protection in Bulgaria reached 52,688 as of December 2022. Almost half of these children (46.5%) were in the age group subject to mandatory primary and lower-secondary education (I-VII grade), and another 18.2% were in the mandatory pre-school education age group (Table 1). It should be noted, that the SAR does not have information on how many Ukrainian children reside in Bulgaria but are not registered for temporary protection, nor provide information on how many of the children registered for temporary protection are still in Bulgaria and how many of them have left the country.

Table 1. Refugee children from Ukraine with temporary protection in Bulgaria, total and by age groups (as of 14 December 2022)

Age group	Number	Share
0-3 years	7612	14,4%
4-6 years	9583	18,2%
7-13 years	24513	46,5%
14-17 years	10980	20,8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52688</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

Source: State Agency for Refugees

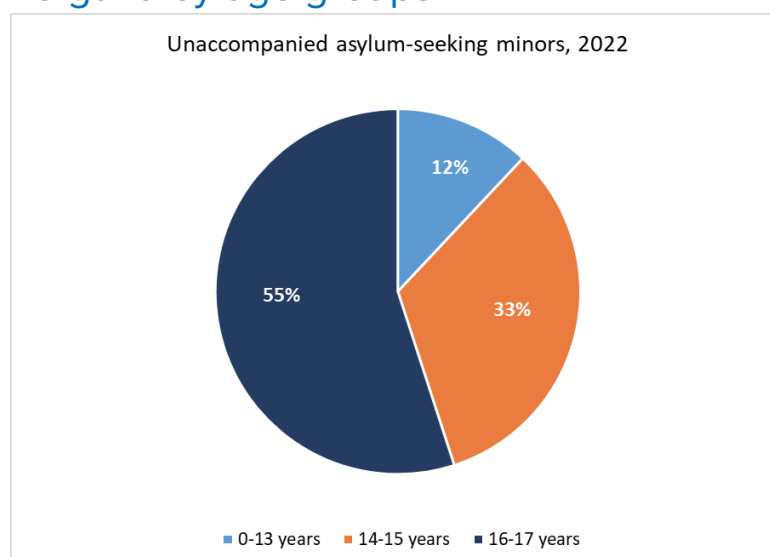
## Unaccompanied and/or Separated Children (UASC)

The majority of refugee children seeking international protection in Bulgaria are unaccompanied and/or separated children (some 86% in 2021 and 66% in 2022). The number of UASC registered for international protection reached 3,348 in 2022, which is at a record high since 1993. Among the 3,348 unaccompanied children that applied for international protection in Bulgaria in 2022, 12% were 0-13 years old, 33% were 14-15 years old and 55% were 16-17 years old (Figure 4). 98% of all these children were boys.

98% of all asylum-seeking children from Afghanistan and 56% of those from Syria were unaccompanied in 2022. According to the Eurostat data, the total number of unaccompanied children from Ukraine that received temporary protection in Bulgaria was 785, or some 1.5% of the total number of children granted temporary protection in 2022<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat (migr\_asytpfm), (migr\_asytpfq), (migr\_asyumtpfm), (migr\_asyumtpfq)

Figure 4. Structure of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Bulgaria by age groups



Source: Eurostat (*migr\_asyappctza*)

## Migration Background and Intentions

There are no reliable statistical data related to the socio-economic background and the reasons why refugee and asylum-seeking children have left their home countries, the history of their journey to Bulgaria, the duration of their stay, and future intentions. The existing research from other countries and feedback provided by the participants in this survey indicate several important contextual factors that could affect their participation and integration into the Bulgarian education system:

(1) The profile of refugees seeking and receiving international protection in Bulgaria is changing considerably in recent years (and especially after the Covid-19 crisis). According to the participants in the study, while the earlier refugee flows consisted mostly of families, including families with highly educated parents, in recent years there has been an increase in the proportion of children and young people entering Bulgaria alone, with a single parent, or with illiterate parents.

(2) Bulgaria is not the intended final destination for a significant part of refugee and asylum-seeking children. Many refugee families or unaccompanied children from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. see Bulgaria as a temporary residence on their way to other countries in Western Europe (with Germany being the most preferred final destination). According to the survey participants, while in previous waves some families stayed in Bulgaria for longer periods (usually 2-3 years) or settled permanently in Bulgaria, in recent years the average length of stay of refugee children that are housed in SAR's registration



centres was significantly shorter, usually ranging between 5-6 months to one year. This short-term horizon, in turn, leads to a lack of interest and reluctance of many families to enrol their children in Bulgarian schools, a lack of motivation for refugee children to learn Bulgarian and attend regular classes in Bulgarian schools, and high dropout and turnover rates in the classrooms.

The above trends pose considerable challenges for designing effective policies that promote the integration of refugee children and students into the Bulgarian education system. Additionally, as reported by survey participants, the reluctance of refugees and asylum seekers to remain in the country, the low motivation of refugee students to attend school, and their high turnover rate all impact the broader system-level and institution-level incentives to invest additional efforts in providing intensive Bulgarian language training for refugee students and developing tailored pedagogical approaches to support their long-term academic progress.

(3) A growing proportion of children seeking international protection come from countries with a long history of military conflicts and experienced significant disruptions in their educational pathways. Many of them have spent years in refugee centres in Turkey and have attended Turkish schools. Others have spent very long periods out of school, or have never enrolled and/or attended school. For example, different estimates show that in Turkey still above a third of Syrian children are not attending compulsory education, meaning that part of refugee children entering Bulgaria from Turkey probably have spent some time outside the formal school system receiving no or only limited education (Crul et al., 2019). All of this has contributed to the accumulation of significant educational deficits, loss of learning habits, or illiteracy. As a result, many of these children have to attend lower classes that are not adequate for their age group when enrolling in Bulgarian schools. In addition to interrupted schooling, many refugee children suffer serious psychological traumas and require extra support in schools.

(4) The large share of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children originating from countries where access to formal schooling was difficult or disrupted brings significant challenges to their integration in Bulgarian classrooms. Nevertheless, the fact, that the highest concentration of unaccompanied children is observed in the age group 16-17 years (55% in 2022), which is above the mandatory school age, Bulgarian ECEC and school systems still need to accommodate a significant (and increasing) number of refugee children who do not have a parent or relative to take care of them (Figure 4). Although there has not yet been a systematic research that exclusively examines the educational integration and educational outcomes of unaccompanied children in Bulgaria, both international literature and the feedback from the participants in this survey indicate that school enrolment and retention of this group is difficult and requires more tailored approaches (see next chapter)

# Data for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

An integral aspect of creating inclusive education systems that are responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups is the availability and accessibility of data to inform evidence-based education policies (UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNHCR, 2021). Yet, there is a lack of comprehensive and policy-relevant research on the educational integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria, with existing studies and data being limited, fragmented, and often specific to particular cases. The readily available data on asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria are scarce. Structured data collection is limited to the data on children applying for asylum and enrolment data.

The SAR reports data about the number of lodged asylum applications of children (including unaccompanied), disaggregated by gender, age groups, and country of origin; and the outcome of these applications<sup>5</sup>. However, it doesn't provide information about the number of refugee children and young people who effectively reside in Bulgaria at a given time point, how many of the children with granted international or temporary protection have left the country, and what was the average length of their stay in Bulgaria. Also, SAR reports the number of asylum applications by children and the granted refugee status to children aggregated in two general age groups: 0-13 years and 14-17 years, which doesn't support more disaggregated estimations, like the estimation of the total number of children and teenagers that are subject to compulsory school education.

The National Statistical Institute (NSI) reports the number of immigrants in the age groups 0-19 years, but these numbers reflect a broader category of children and young people that have established their usual residence in the territory of Bulgaria for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months, having previously been usually resident in another country<sup>6</sup> and are not disaggregated to provide insights about how many of these immigrants have refugee status.

MES integrated data on refugee children and students enrolled in Bulgarian kindergartens and schools in the National Education Management Information System (EMIS). However, the extent to which EMIS data is used systematically for monitoring of participation and academic outcomes of this group of students is unknown. In response to the structured

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://t.ly/6WRB>

<sup>6</sup> According to NSI Methodology for Studying of Migration, available at [https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/metadata/Pop\\_5\\_Metodology\\_migration\\_en.pdf](https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/metadata/Pop_5_Metodology_migration_en.pdf)

request for information specifically designed for this study, MES provided data that are not organized in unified and consistent indicators (for each of the academic years specified), which are appropriate for monitoring and evaluating the trends in refugee students' enrolment, participation, needs and progression in education.

A significant challenge for ongoing monitoring and targeted support services is related to the lack of data, disaggregated by refugee status, about crucial aspects of participation, retention, drop-out, and learning. More specifically, according to the official MES response to the above-mentioned request for information:

- no data are collected and stored on the number of refugee students with international or temporary protection who do not attend school regularly (e.g. number of students with 15 or more unexcused absences);
- no data are collected and stored on the number of dropouts among the refugee students with international or temporary protection (who left the school before the end of the school year);
- no data collected and stored on the number of children and students seeking or granted temporary or international protection for whom general support for personal development has been planned or provided and/or who have received additional training in particular subjects;
- no disaggregated data are collected about the gender, age, and nationality of asylum-seeking and refugee children who received additional training in Bulgarian as a foreign language.

In addition, refugee education data are not well integrated into national statistical frameworks. EMIS data on refugee children are not publicly available and are not disclosed regularly. NSI doesn't provide data on the participation in the education of refugee students. Despite the ongoing coordination and cooperation between the SAR and MES, the administrative records of the relevant institutions are not linked to each other, and data are not exchanged regularly. As a result, SAR doesn't have data on how many of the compulsory school-aged asylum-seeking and refugee children attend schools and how many of them remain outside the formal education system.

Overall, the scarcity of structured data on asylum-seeking and refugee children limits the opportunities to monitor and inform policies and propose targeted efforts to support the effective integration of these children into the education system (Cerna, 2019).

## Recommendations for Improving Data Collection

Refugees who arrive in Bulgaria come from diverse national, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, each with unique circumstances and prior educational experiences. Data that supports a thorough examination of pre-migration and post-migration factors, as well as individual factors, is crucial for understanding the specific needs of refugee students and developing appropriate educational support.

Bulgaria may benefit from setting standards for more structured refugee education data collection and better data-sharing arrangements across institutions. More specifically, in line with UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNHCR recommendations on refugee education statistics, these standards should provide for disaggregation of data on refugee education by refugee status, age, gender, disability, education attainment, and country of origin. Collecting information on parental education is also important because the low educational level or illiteracy of a parent is considered a substantial risk factor for the successful integration of refugee children into the education system, although less common than the lack of Bulgarian language proficiency (OECD, 2015; Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2019). Education data could be more valuable by expanding monitoring indicators to encompass not just enrolment, but also dropout rates, retention rates, learning difficulties, and support measures. This broader approach would enable a more comprehensive assessment of the learning and overall development of refugee children, while better informing education responses for displaced populations and addressing their specific educational needs.

# Access to education

## Legal Framework

Pre-school education in Bulgaria is compulsory from 4 to the age of 6. Compulsory school education covers the age range between 7 and 16 years. Upon parental decision, school enrolment is possible from the age of 6. No restrictions to access to education are allowed based on race, nationality, gender, ethnic or social origin, religion, or social status.

According to the Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, Member States shall include school-age children in compulsory education under similar conditions as nationals of the host country within three months of the asylum application. The young individuals that have reached the age for which education is not compulsory should also be granted access to secondary education if they wish to enrol.

Bulgaria has a well-established mechanism for the provision of access of refugee children (both international protection beneficiaries and those with temporary protection) to the national education system under the same terms as Bulgarian nationals. The Ordinance 3 of 6 April 2017 on the Terms and Conditions for the Admission and Training of Asylum-Seekers



Artem, 16 years old, from Ukraine stands posing for a portrait in front of the building of his high school called "the Vocational High School in River Shipbuilding and Navigation" in Ruse, Bulgaria, where he studies. He wants to become a sailor like his father.

©UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov

or Beneficiaries of International Protection introduced a simplified procedure for school enrolment and follow-up of refugee students. Admission of compulsory school-age asylum-seeking and refugee children in public kindergartens and schools is free of charge and open throughout the school year. Each of the 28 regional education authorities (REAs) accepts applications from parents of children with international or temporary protection who want to enrol their children in kindergarten or school and have trained experts to support the admission of asylum-seeking or refugee children. Depending on the age, location, and preferences of the parents, the refugee children and students should be directed to a relevant educational institution within 7 working days, following the submission of the application. The approach that has been adopted involves distributing a small number of children among a larger number of schools. Within each school, these students are typically placed in different classes. This approach is intended to prevent their segregation, promote interaction with their Bulgarian peers, and facilitate their integration.

Access to education and enrolment rates are often considered indicators of refugee integration in the local educational system (Cerna, 2019; UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNHCR, 2021). Although Bulgaria granted an unobstructed access to education and the simplified procedure for school admission, the available data suggest that this access does not automatically translate into school enrolment and attendance, with large numbers of pre-school and school-aged refugee children and teenagers not attending compulsory pre-school and school education.

### **Enrolment in Compulsory Pre-school Education**

There is growing research evidence that refugee children's participation in ECEC and pre-school education contributes significantly for mitigating of educational inequalities, helping young refugee children manage their trauma, increasing local language skills, and improving their academic performance and progression in school education (OECD, 2015; Cerna, 2019; European Commission, 2022; Stevens, 2023). For example, PISA data consistently indicate that immigrant students that have attended pre-school programs perform significantly better in the PISA reading assessments than their peers who don't have such an educational experience (OECD, 2015). Better integration opportunities provided by participation in pre-school education is confirmed by the experiences of two of the children included in the study. These children (aged 7 and 13) arrived in Bulgaria with their family in the earlier refugee waves and have settled permanently in the country. In-depth interviews held with them clearly demonstrated that attendance of kindergarten has contributed significantly to their fluency of the Bulgarian language, helped them to start school at almost the same level as their Bulgarian peers and promoted their fast and effective integration into school. The provision of high quality pre-schooling is therefore an important means for providing refugee children with a

strong foundation for their future education and increasing their chances to succeed in school (Stevens, 2023).

Despite the fact that Bulgaria has granted free access to pre-school education for asylum-seeking and refugee children, their participation in compulsory pre-schooling is very limited. According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science, only six children with international protection in compulsory pre-school age were enrolled in one kindergarten and two schools on the territory of Sofia-city and Haskovo districts in the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 (Table 2). There is no information on the number of refugee children with international protection enrolled in pre-school education in the data provided for the school year 2022/2023. Due to the lack of data with an appropriate level of disaggregation by age of children seeking or granted international protection who resided on the territory of the country during the respective school year, the actual enrolment rate of children subject to pre-school education cannot be calculated.

The survey results suggest that the current limited participation of asylum-seeking and refugee children with international protection in pre-school programs could be attributed mainly to:

- lack of information and parental reluctance towards pre-school programs due to limited familiarity and experience with such programs; limited interest due to prevailing aspirations of many refugee families to leave Bulgaria and settle permanently in another country;
- poverty, logistical barriers (e.g. lack of transportation), language barriers, or safety concerns;

**Table 2. Number of children seeking or granted international protection enrolled in compulsory pre-school education (December 2022)**

Demographic characteristics		2020/2021	2021/2022
<b>Gender</b>	Male	5	5
	Female	1	1
<b>Home country</b>	Iraq	2	2
	Afghanistan	1	1
	Syria	1	1
	Lebanon	1	1
	No nationality	1	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>

Source: Data provided by MES upon request



A significant number of Ukrainian children with temporary protection also remain outside compulsory pre-school education. According to MES data, only 512 Ukrainian children out of all 9,583 children aged 4-6 years with temporary protection were enrolled in compulsory pre-school education as of December 2022 (Table 3). This means that the enrolment rate of Ukrainian refugee children in compulsory pre-school education was some 5.3% by the end of 2022.

The main challenges to the enrolment of Ukrainian children in pre-school education are related to:

- discrepancies between the vaccination calendars in Bulgaria and Ukraine and difficulties in meeting the mandatory vaccination requirements set by the Bulgarian authorities;
- lack of available places in public kindergartens in many of the locations with a high concentration of Ukrainian refugees (e.g. Sofia, Burgas, Varna and Plovdiv);
- parental preferences and reluctance to enrol their children in Bulgarian kindergartens.

### **Enrolment in Compulsory School Education**

According to MES data, as of December 2022, a total of 136 students seeking or receiving international protection (mostly children from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) and 2,250 Ukrainian students with temporary protection are enrolled in Bulgarian state and municipal schools. The available data from the State Agency for Refugees relates only to the number of asylum applications submitted by children and youth, but not to the actual number of asylum-seeking and refugee children of mandatory school age residing in the country by December 2022. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the gross and net enrolment rates of these groups of children. But considering the increasing number of asylum-seeking and refugee children in the last two years, and especially the massive arrival of Ukrainian school-aged children in 2022, the enrolment data suggest that a large number of newly arrived children remain outside the formal education system. For instance, based on data from the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), a total of 4,483 children (aged 0-17) applied for international protection during the months of the 2021/2022 academic year (September 2021 to June 2022). However, data from the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) indicates that only 64 asylum-seeking or refugee children with international protection were enrolled for the first time in the academic year 2021/2022, suggesting that only a small portion of the children who entered Bulgaria ended up attending school in the same academic year. As for refugee children from Ukraine, available data shows that only 5% of all Ukrainian children of school age (7-17 years) with temporary protection were attending Bulgarian schools by the end of 2022. It is important to highlight that the Ministry of Education and Science, upon request, did not provide

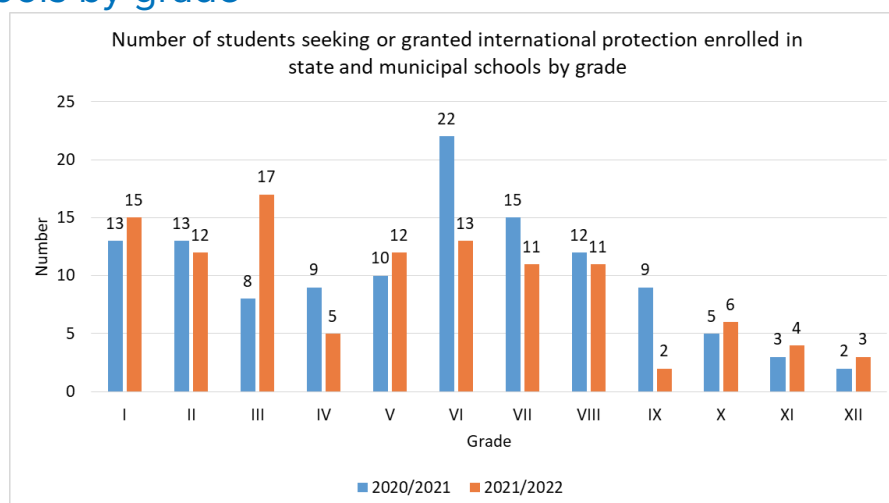


disaggregated information on enrolled students for the 2022/2023 academic year based on age and grades. Information regarding the distribution of enrolled students who are seeking or receiving international protection by grades has been provided for the past two academic years, namely 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. It shows that the majority of these children were enrolled in primary education (grades I-IV) and lower secondary education (grades V-VII). The proportion of students enrolled in the compulsory first stage of upper secondary education was considerably lower (Figure 5). Furthermore, Figure 5 sheds light on the level of turnover among this group of students, in addition to providing information on the distribution by grades. As evident from the data, the number of enrolled students showed significant variation by grade in two consecutive years, suggesting that a considerable number of asylum-seeking and refugee students with international protection did not continue their education in the next grade in the subsequent academic year.

Despite the absence of disaggregated data, the findings of the study strongly indicate that unaccompanied children are a highly vulnerable group in terms of accessing compulsory schooling. Feedback received suggests that the majority of these children are not enrolled in school, and even those who do attend often drop out after a short period or face challenges with low academic performance. Only a small proportion of unaccompanied children manage to successfully progress to the next grade.

The MES data show also that before the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the enrolment of asylum-seeking and refugee students was concentrated in a relatively small number of schools in several districts. For example, in the academic year 2021/2022, all of these students attended

**Figure 5. Distribution of students seeking or granted international protection enrolled in state and municipal schools by grade**

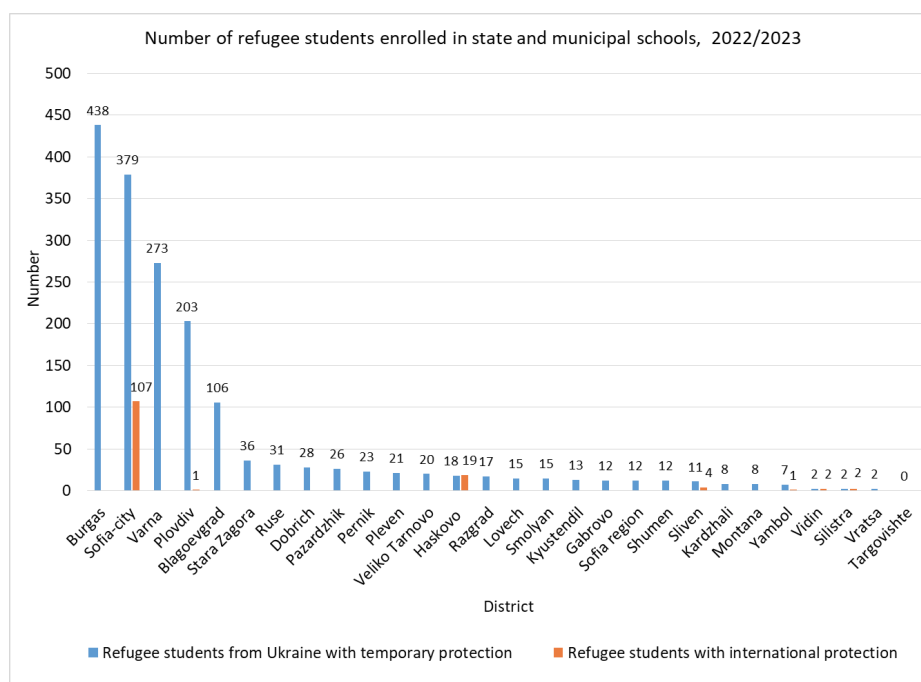


Source: Data provided by MES upon request

26 schools across 5 districts of the country, with 93% of them attending 17 schools in Sofia-city and 5 schools in Harmanli near SAR's registration and reception centres (Figure 6).

The arrival of large number of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 significantly changed the territorial distribution of asylum-seeking and refugee students, involving a large number of schools with no experience in integrating refugee children and young people. In the academic year 2022/2023, some 431 schools located in 27 out of 28 districts of the country admitted Ukrainian students (Table 3). A large number of Ukrainian children and young people has been accommodated under the Humanitarian Accommodation Programme for Ukrainian Refugees in resort settlements in the districts of Burgas and Varna, where the local schools do not have the necessary infrastructure and capacity to accommodate large number of newly arriving students. This put local education systems in those two districts under significant pressure. As of December 2022, 25% of all refugee students from Ukraine were enrolled in 48 schools in Burgas districts, and an additional 15% of them have enrolled in 43 schools in Varna. Due to a lack of enrolment capacity in schools in the same locality, some of these pupils are enrolled in centres in other localities that have their own transport. The school system of the capital Sofia also concentrates a large number of Ukrainian refugee students, with 379 students enrolled in 97 schools (Table 3).

**Figure 6. Territorial distribution of refugee students enrolled in state and municipal schools in the academic year 2022/2023**



Source: Data provided by MES upon request

Table 3. Enrolment in compulsory pre-school and school education of Ukrainian children with temporary protection (December 2022)

District	Number of children and students			Number of institutions		
	Children (0-6 y.)	Students (7-18 y.)	Total	Kinder gartens	Schools	Total
Blagoevgrad	33	106	139	12	23	35
Burgas	133	438	571	34	48	82
Varna	115	273	388	42	43	85
Veliko Tarnovo	4	20	24	4	9	13
Vidin	2	2	4	2	1	3
Vratsa	0	2	2	0	2	2
Gabrovo	4	12	16	4	7	11
Dobrich	21	28	49	10	9	19
Kardzhali	2	8	10	1	4	5
Kyustendil	2	13	15	2	9	11
Lovech	11	15	26	5	5	10
Montana	3	8	11	2	5	7
Pazardzhik	3	26	29	2	11	13
Pernik	5	23	28	5	12	17
Pleven	7	21	28	7	8	15
Plovdiv	75	203	278	30	52	82
Razgrad	4	17	21	4	13	17
Ruse	5	31	36	4	13	17
Silistra	0	2	2	0	2	2
Sliven	4	11	15	3	9	12
Smolyan	10	15	25	7	6	13
Sofia-city	23	379	402	6	97	103
Sofia-region	16	12	28	10	10	20
Stara Zagora	22	36	58	16	8	24
Targovishte	0	0	0	0	0	0
Haskovo	4	18	22	4	11	15
Shumen	4	12	16	4	9	13
Yambol	0	7	7	0	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>1738</b>	<b>2250</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>651</b>

Source: Data provided by MES upon request

## Enrolment in Post-compulsory Secondary Education

Young people in the age group 16-17 years are beyond the scope of national legislation on compulsory education. Although this age group constitutes a significant part of the annual number of children arriving from the Middle East and South Asian countries entering Bulgaria and seeking international protection (Figure 2), their enrolment in the second stage of upper secondary education is almost non-existent. According to data provided by the MES, the number of pupils seeking or granted international protection enrolled in the non-compulsory second stage of upper secondary education was only 5 pupils in the 2020/2021 academic year and only 7 pupils in 2021/2022 academic year (Figure 6). This means that 16-17-year old asylum-seekers and refugees with international protection are generally excluded from school integration programs. Since the data provided by the MES on the number of enrolled refugee students from Ukraine are not disaggregated by age groups, it is not possible to estimate their participation in non-compulsory secondary education.

Despite the existing legal mechanisms in place to guarantee unobstructed access to education for asylum-seeking and refugee students, along with efforts to facilitate their adaptation, survey findings reveal significant barriers to their enrolment:

- **The reluctance of families to enrol their children in local schools.** Bulgaria is considered a transit country by many refugee families and unaccompanied children and youth on their route to other final destinations in the EU. For a large part of refugee parents, the intended length of stay in the country is usually very short, which diminishes their motivation to enrol their children in Bulgarian school. In families where parents themselves have not attended school or are illiterate, they may not attach great importance to education and many of them do not show interest in enrolling their child in school. In addition, many Ukrainian parents were reluctant to enrol their children in Bulgarian schools immediately after arriving in Bulgaria, assuming that they would return to their country shortly. In some cases, this decision was additionally influenced by the fact that education in Ukraine was not equivalent to European standards, with schooling typically only lasting until the eleventh grade, compared to the twelve grades of schooling in Bulgaria.
- **Disrupted education.** Many students seeking international protection have significant gaps in their educational background due to disrupted or completely interrupted schooling as a result of military conflicts, displacement, or other circumstances. This can lead to a loss of learning habits and a decreased interest in schooling. Additionally, in some cases, Bulgarian educational authorities may direct these students to classes that are typically designed for much younger children, which may not be appealing to them.

- **Limited ability to navigate the local education system.** Many children and students entering Bulgaria from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, etc. are unaccompanied children and youth. Many are sent by their parents to travel alone with specific goals regarding their final destination. Attending school in an intermediate (transit) country is not among these goals. Many unaccompanied children are often not aware of the existing educational opportunities and lack knowledge on how to enrol in school or access educational services. Furthermore, as the study results suggest, unaccompanied children residing in SAR's RRCs are often influenced by other refugees who share sentiments related to further travel to their desired final destination, which can deter them from considering education in Bulgaria as a viable option. The lack of guidance further hampers their ability to benefit from educational opportunities in Bulgaria.
- **Safety considerations.** The participants in the study share that many parents express concerns about the safety of their child, if the child must commute to a distant school or one located in another locality. According to the representative of SAR's refugee centre in Sofia, refugee teenagers above the compulsory school age often have limited options to attend school, which may be limited to evening classes. However, this can pose safety concerns for them as it may involve traveling to and from school during evening hours, which is not considered a safe option for them.
- **Economic hardship.** Many refugee families face severe poverty and insecure housing. Some of the participants in the study pointed out cases in which refugee students from poor families were not able to attend school due to lack of appropriate clothing and school supplies. In some cases, the young refugees that come from low-income backgrounds may face the need to work to provide for their basic needs or take care of younger siblings.
- **Access to online education in their home country schools.** Many schools in Ukraine have resumed their educational process online following the onset of the military conflict, and a significant number of Ukrainian students displaced in Bulgaria, especially in the upper age groups, have chosen to continue their education online in their schools in Ukraine. According to the respondent from MES, all Ukrainian refugee children of school age who were in Bulgaria as of June 2022 have received a certificate of completion for the 2021/2022 academic year from their schools in Ukraine.
- **Limitations related to local educational infrastructure.** As mentioned, many Ukrainian refugee children are concentrated in resort villages that lack the necessary school infrastructure to accommodate a large number of new students and fully meet the needs of these children.

- **Problems with legal status.** According to participants in the study, a problem with school attendance also arises when asylum-seeking children are denied status or when their temporary residence cards expire. In this case, the school where the child is enrolled should remove him/her from the register. Although there is no statistical data confirming this conclusion, similar cases likely explain why some children leave school before the end of the academic year, even if they remain in the country.
- **Limited enforcement mechanisms to encourage enrolment of asylum-seeking and refugee children in compulsory education.** Pre-school and school education in Bulgaria is mandatory for all children aged 4-16 years and failure to enrol children in school or neglect school attendance is subject to sanctions. However, enforcement of these measures is often lax when it comes to vulnerable groups such as refugee parents.

## Recommendations for Policies and Practices to Promote Participation in Education

Existing research and practices from other countries suggest that there is no single policy that could encourage refugee children's participation in education. Many of the existing barriers to enrolling refugee children and students in the Bulgarian education system cannot be overcome through educational measures alone, but require a holistic approach and coordinated policies - economic, social, educational, and health-related. Nevertheless, various interventions can help promote the enrolment of refugee children in pre-school and school education, including:

- Raising awareness among refugee communities about the importance of early childhood education, the benefits it can offer, and the fact that it is free of charge, the availability of places in pre-school classes in kindergartens and schools in their area.
- Providing extra practical support and guidance to parents. This may include maintaining open communication with parents to help them understand how the Bulgarian educational system works and the benefits of enrolling their children in school, as well as offering practical support with the enrolment process, including assistance with paperwork and navigating the administrative procedures.
- Addressing existing misconceptions or concerns of parents regarding enrolling their children in Bulgarian kindergartens or schools through preliminary and supportive additional work with parents. This may include outreach efforts to establish rapport and trust with refugee parents, understanding their concerns and addressing them in counselling sessions. This may involve discussions on the importance of education, addressing cultural or language barriers, and clarifying misconceptions or fears that parents may have about the education system and the well-being of their child.

- Providing more welcoming and culturally inclusive pre-school and school environments that can help build trust with refugee families, including language support and cultural sensitivity training for teachers and staff.
- Offering flexible learning options, pathways, and transitions to accommodate the needs of older asylum-seeking and refugee students who may have missed schooling or have low skill levels. One possible option is to offer opportunities for enrolment in short VET programs that could be appealing to them.
- Improving monitoring of enrolment and refugee student performance and turnover.
- Providing ongoing support and follow-up with parents to ensure that their children are attending school regularly and are benefiting from the education system. This may involve monitoring attendance, addressing any issues or concerns that arise, and providing ongoing support to parents as needed. This may reduce dropout and high turnover rates and encourage other parents to enrol their children.

In addition, strengthening the linkages between schools and other critical public services, such as child protection and social protection, is crucial to address barriers to school enrollment and factors contributing to dropout rates among refugee and asylum seeking students. This approach recognizes that education is not an isolated sector but intersects with various other areas of public service delivery. Establishing effective coordination mechanisms, such as interagency working groups or task forces involving education authorities, child protection agencies, social welfare departments, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders could facilitate joint planning, resource-sharing, and information exchange related to integration of refugee and asylum seeking children. One example of such coordination efforts can be seen in Bulgaria's response to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine. Bulgaria established a National Crisis Headquarters for Refugees from Ukraine, which was responsible for planning, organizing, managing, coordinating, and controlling activities related to evacuation, reception, accommodation, and the provision of necessary services such as medical, educational, and others to those who entered the country due to the war in Ukraine. To support the National Crisis Headquarters, six inter-agency working groups were established: Border Control, Entry and Proceedings for International or Temporary Protection, Transport, Accommodation, Social Affairs, Employment, and Public Information and Public Relations. These working groups aimed to manage actions in a coordinated manner among government institutions, authorities, civil and business organizations, and volunteers. A specific sub-group focusing on education, known as the "Education" sub-group, was established within the "Social Affairs" working group to address the provision of education services to Ukrainian children. Although these mechanisms did not sustain over time, this example highlights the importance of efforts to strengthen linkages between education and other critical public services in order to support the education of refugee children.

In addition to establishing effective interagency coordination, it is crucial to develop effective mechanisms that facilitate the sharing of information and referrals between different service providers. This process can play a vital role in supporting the educational integration of refugee and asylum seeking students, especially those facing increased vulnerability. For example, schools can share relevant student information with State Agency for Refugees, Child Protection Agency and/or social protection services to identify and provide support to refugee students who are at risk. Likewise, child protection agency, social protection services, family-type accommodation centres and SAR's refugee centres can refer children to schools and assist in ensuring their enrolment and retention in school. By establishing these channels of ongoing communication and collaboration, the education and protection sectors can work together to address the needs and challenges faced by refugee students, thereby promoting their access to education and well-being.



# Addressing Learning Needs

## Submersion in Education

As a response to the arrival of large number of children from Syria and Afghanistan seeking international protection in 2015 and 2016 (see Figure 2), Bulgaria adopted a legal mechanism guaranteeing unobstructed access to education for all asylum-seeking and refugee children, based on the model of direct “immersion” of refugee students. The newly arrived students are placed directly in the mainstream classes, thus combining language and content learning, rather than involving them in separate “preparatory” literacy classes or Bulgarian language classes. Existing research evidence indicates that including children as soon as possible in regular classes provides better chances for school success, whereas educating refugee children in segregated classes for extended periods often results in early school leaving or not attending school at all (OECD, 2015; Crul et al, 2019; Cerna, 2019). Generally, this model



*Bulgarian language teacher Krasimira Lyubcheva teaches a group of Ukrainian refugee children at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub is employing teachers and providing Ukrainian refugees with various supports to help them integrate quickly into their host country.  
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is preferred by many EU countries, although some countries do offer special “pull-out” programs (see Box 1 below).

### Box 1. Examples of practices with welcome, submersion, preparation, or introduction classes

**In Germany**, refugee children typically attend preparation or introduction classes for one or two years before transitioning to regular classes. Depending on the regulations of the specific Bundesland (federal state), city, or school, additional assistance in German as a second language may be provided if their proficiency in German still lags behind. While there are some preparation classes associated with Gymnasiums (college preparatory schools), it is more common for students in secondary education to attend preparation classes in Hauptschule or Realschule, which are lower and middle-level vocational education schools. Only students with previous high school experience and/or proven academic proficiency are admitted into upper secondary general education at a Gymnasium or a comprehensive school.

**In Sweden**, legislative changes have been adopted in 2016, stipulating that a student is considered newly arrived for up to four years after their arrival. A new organizational form called preparatory classes (förberedelseklasser) has been established for these students. However, students cannot be placed full-time in preparatory classes, and the duration of their placement is limited to a maximum of two years. This means that they are granted some teaching hours in regular classes, the number of which and the subjects are not regulated, but left to the discretion of teachers based on their assessment of students’ individual needs and circumstances. Students can be transferred to regular classes at any time during the academic year, depending on their development and needs. The placement of students in preparatory classes is not obligatory, as the head teacher determines it based on initial assessments and social factors. This means that students may also be placed directly into regular classes. The transition to regular classes is no longer solely dependent on the students’ progress in Swedish as a second language, but also factors such as the students’ overall academic abilities, social integration, and language development pedagogy used by regular class teachers are also considered.

*Source: Crul et al. (2019). How the different policies and school systems affect the inclusion of Syrian refugee children in Sweden, Germany, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey. Comparative Migration Studies 7: 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6>*

In theory, the chosen model for direct immersion of refugee students in Bulgaria is associated with numerous benefits.

First, it is believed that direct exposure to learning experience in the Bulgarian language allows refugee students to rapidly develop their language skills. This can help them communicate effectively with peers and teachers, access educational resources, and participate fully in classroom activities.

Second, being immersed in regular educational settings can facilitate social integration for refugee students by allowing them to interact with their Bulgarian peers and become familiar

with the local cultural and social norms. This can help foster friendships and develop a sense of belonging. International practices indicate that placing refugee students in lengthy preparatory classes often leads to segregation and stigmatization, which in turn negatively affect their learning and overall integration (OECD, 2015; Cerna 2019).

Third, access to regular educational programs can provide refugee students with the opportunity to follow the standard curriculum; receive instruction from qualified teachers; engage in educational activities that support their cognitive development; experience academic progress and keep up with their peers. Existing evidence from other countries suggests that the programs that separate students from the main curriculum often result in reduced instructional time for the core curriculum, less qualified teachers being assigned to teach these students, and a tendency for them to lag behind their peers academically (OECD, 2015).

The participants in this study have differing viewpoints on whether the selected model is suitable for addressing the specific circumstances of refugee children in Bulgaria, as well as its practical effectiveness in meeting their learning needs. While in some cases direct immersion combined with targeted support has shown positive outcomes for Bulgarian language learning and academic progress, especially for younger students, most of the participants expressed concerns that unprepared refugee children may feel overwhelmed upon entering school and may drop out soon after, particularly if they are older students and unaccompanied children. The participants in the study, including principals and teachers who were interviewed, report that many refugee children learn to read and write in Bulgarian, but experience difficulties to comprehend what they are reading or writing. Some participants consider that it is more appropriate to offer introductory training in Bulgarian language before students enter mainstream education, which includes, among other things, mastering fundamental concepts used in the curriculum. This proposal is backed by practical observations, suggesting that students who underwent short preparatory classes in Bulgarian language during the summer break demonstrated better readiness for mainstream classrooms.

In general, the survey results indicate that existing challenges are linked to inefficiencies in the practical implementation of the adopted immersion model, such as limited availability of appropriate teaching aids, teachers' limited experience in using pedagogical approaches for teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language, insufficient time or irregular provision of additional Bulgarian language training in schools, limited access to extra support for refugee students facing learning difficulties, and the complexity of Bulgarian curricula, particularly in higher grades, which demands a high level of language proficiency. The main aspects of this model are detailed in the subsequent chapters.

## Determining Educational Needs

It is crucial to accurately assess the prior knowledge and competencies of asylum-seeking and refugee students when they enter the education system, as this is essential for their successful integration (OECD, 2018; Eurydice, 2022). Recognizing the unique needs of students who are transitioning from one country to another is a key prerequisite for facilitating the transfer of their knowledge and skills, and providing comprehensive support. Moreover, assessment of students' prior knowledge and skills in their native language is considered the most appropriate approach, as this enables more accurate diagnostics without language barriers (OECD, 2022). Existing evidence suggests that poor measures of assessment on entering the school system can have a detrimental impact on these children (OECD, 2018).

Bulgaria is one of the few countries in Europe that do not have any top-level policies on determining newly arrived learners' educational or personal needs (Eurydice, 2022). Different procedures are implemented depending on the availability of documents indicating prior education.

The approach for enrolling asylum-seeking and refugee children in schools introduced with the Ordinance 3 of 6 April 2017 on the Terms and Conditions for the Admission and Training of Asylum-Seekers or Beneficiaries of International Protection<sup>7</sup> does not require them to prove previous education levels or demonstrate a basic command of the Bulgarian language. The Ordinance 3 introduced a dedicated enrolment mechanism that includes the creation of a special committee of teachers within the respective school. This committee consists of a Bulgarian language teacher, teachers of relevant subjects, a school psychologist, or a pedagogical adviser. The committee conducts interviews with the child to assess their previous educational experience, proficiency in the Bulgarian language, as well as other skills or needs. Based on the information collected during the interview, the committee prepares a report for the school principal, recommending the appropriate grade and class for the new student. The report also outlines measures for additional support, such as additional classes in Bulgarian language or other subjects.

The above mechanism also outlines requirements for placing children in a specific grade. For students in grades 1-4, the placement is solely based on age. For older students, there is a provision that limits enrolment to a grade that is no more than three years earlier than the one that corresponds to the child's age.

For asylum-seeking and refugee children who possess original educational certificates, there is another admission mechanism, introduced with Ordinance 11 of 01 September 2016 on the Assessment of Results from Pupil Training, that enables their enrolment upon

<sup>7</sup> [https://mon.bg/upload/4160/nrdb3\\_2017\\_obuchenie.pdf](https://mon.bg/upload/4160/nrdb3_2017_obuchenie.pdf)

recognition of their diploma by the school principal (for students in I-VI grade) or by the REA (for students VII-XII grades).

The results of the survey indicate that there are varying approaches in determining the learning needs and grade placements of students. Based on the interviews conducted, it is evident that the decision on student placement in a particular grade is often made by the school principal, who assesses documentation and may also consult with parents. This approach often involves evaluation of the most basic information: whether the child has received any education, and up to which grade level it has studied. According to the respondents, students are usually enrolled in lower grades, most often one grade lower than their age-group. It is worth mentioning that all Syrian children that participated in the focus group were placed three grades below their actual age group, and none of them underwent an admission interview for school placement.

Overall, the adopted admission mechanism is considered appropriate in terms of fast inclusion into mainstream education of the newly arrived students, but certain limitations exist in terms of mapping of previous knowledge and skills, determining further learning needs and proposing the best educational trajectory for the individual student. The findings of the study indicate that without proper assessment of prior knowledge and competences, there is a high risk of inadequate placement of newly arrived children and young people in an educational setting that doesn't meet their learning needs and can hinder their integration, diminish their learning motivation and contribute to a higher risk of dropping out of education. The participants highlighted that being placed in lower grade levels has a demoralizing impact on certain children, as they may need to study alongside much younger peers in some instances.

Moreover, this approach could lead to high-ability students being placed in a level that is not suitable for their abilities, resulting in a delay in their academic progress.

## Bulgarian Language Instructions

The PISA results consistently indicate the importance of learning the language of instruction for academic success of migrant students (OECD, 2015; 2018). Countries that experience minimal achievement gaps between immigrant and native students typically have well-established language support programs with clear goals and standards. In contrast, in countries where immigrant students perform notably lower than their native peers, the provision of language support tends to be less systematic (Christensen, 2007).

Bulgaria adopted an approach for delivering Bulgarian language training to asylum-seeking and refugee students that involves integrating language learning with the regular curriculum,



while also providing additional language training support as needed. The Pre-school and School Education Act mandates that children and students seeking or granted international protection in accordance with the Law on Asylum and Refugees, who are enrolled in kindergarten or school, must be provided with additional Bulgarian language training if deemed necessary. As per Ordinance 6 of 11 August 2016 on the acquisition of the Bulgarian literary language<sup>8</sup>, issued by the Minister for Education and Science, additional Bulgarian language training to support the integration of migrant children, students, and those seeking or granted international protection may be provided either individually or in groups. This additional language training must utilize curricula that are specifically developed for teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language using teaching aids developed in accordance with this curricula. The decision on the mode of training is at the discretion of the principal of the receiving school or kindergarten, who has to take into consideration the specific needs of each child, in alignment with the guidelines set forth in the national educational standards for inclusive education. The duration of the additional language training varies depending on the educational level. For students in primary education (grades I-IV), it can range from up to a maximum of 90 instructional hours per academic year (3 hours per week). For students in lower-secondary education (grades V-VII), it can be up to a maximum of 120 instructional



*Bulgarian language teacher Krasimira Lyubcheva teaches a group of Ukrainian refugees at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub is employing teachers and providing refugees with various supports to help them integrate quickly into their host country.*

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<sup>8</sup> [https://mon.bg/upload/4179/naredba\\_6\\_11.08.2016\\_bg\\_ezik.pdf](https://mon.bg/upload/4179/naredba_6_11.08.2016_bg_ezik.pdf)

hours (4 hours per week). And for students in the compulsory first stage of secondary education (grades VIII-X), it can be up to a maximum of 180 instructional hours per academic year, with 5 hours per week. In addition, children in pre-school groups receive additional training that covers up to 60 pedagogical situations. This training is based on a special curriculum for Bulgarian language as a foreign language, designed for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants of compulsory school age.

Despite the presence of a comprehensive legal framework aimed at providing Bulgarian language training to aid the inclusion of asylum-seeking and refugee students into Bulgarian schools, certain challenges still remain.

The literature differentiates between two types of language development: “basic interpersonal communication skills” and “cognitive academic language proficiency” (Cummins, 1981; Cummins et al., 2005; Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017). These two types of language skills have distinct differences. “Basic interpersonal communication skills” refer to the spoken language and its rules, which are typically the first skills developed in both home and school settings. On the other hand, “cognitive academic language proficiency” refers to the more abstract set of skills needed for students to think, read, write, and learn all the content of the curriculum in an academic setting. Based on research findings, it is suggested that children generally acquire basic interpersonal communication skills within six months to two years of consistent daily exposure. However, the development of cognitive academic language proficiency, which is crucial for success in school environments, may take five years or longer, even for students who have had appropriate previous schooling in their first language. (Cummins et al., 2005; Clifford et al., 2013; OECD, 2015; Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017; Cerna, 2019; UNHCR, 2021).

According to the feedback from teachers and school principals interviewed for the purpose of this research, younger refugee students tend to acquire verbal skills in Bulgarian relatively quickly and are able to communicate successfully in school. However, survey findings also suggest that the current practices for provision of the additional training in Bulgarian language may present significant challenges for the development of cognitive academic language proficiency of refugee students, particularly those who speak languages that are very different from Bulgarian, have experienced limited or interrupted prior schooling and lack literacy in their first language. These students often struggle to keep up with the regular curriculum, facing double disadvantages in their learning journey.

The study findings indicate that the instruction hours allocated for additional learning of the Bulgarian language at school are often below the maximum hours outlined in the respective ordinance, and are generally highly insufficient. Furthermore, the additional classes are typically scheduled after regular classes and, in some cases, are not consistently delivered

as per the feedback received. Due to the limited instruction time and irregular practices in place, the effectiveness of language learning may be hindered, especially for refugee students from Middle Eastern countries whose native languages differ significantly from Bulgarian.

The current approach of direct immersion in school without prior language training presents a particular challenge for older students who are illiterate in their native language. These students need to learn Bulgarian as their first language for reading and writing. They are usually placed in lower classes, but the requirement of placing them no more than 3 grades below their age may result in attending classes that assume they already possess developed reading and writing skills in order to keep up with the curriculum. As a result, the chances of successfully completing the school year for these students are extremely low.

On the other hand, the study findings suggest that Ukrainian students, particularly younger children or those who speak Russian, tend to overcome language difficulties more quickly in school due to the linguistic similarities between the languages and lack of learning gaps. Even though they may have difficulties in directly engaging in the educational process, they understand much more than children from other countries who take more time to learn the language. However, the teachers involved in the study shared that overcoming the language barrier remains challenging for this group as well. Teachers who speak Russian seem to be more successful in communicating with Ukrainian children, and their knowledge of the language is valuable to the entire team as they assist their colleagues who do not speak Russian in explaining basic concepts taught in class using Russian.

Provision of quality Bulgarian language training to refugee students also require qualified teachers who are specifically trained in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language or as a second language. Teachers who work with refugee students also require enhanced skills to effectively provide subject-specific instruction to students for whom Bulgarian is not their native language. However, the results of the study indicate that teachers are often required to rely on their own abilities and resources without adequate training. The review of teacher initial education programs reveals that preparation for teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language is not part of the mandatory modules, but students have access to elective modules featuring teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language or teaching Bulgarian in bilingual settings. There is no data on how many future teachers enrol in such modules. In addition, Bulgaria invested in provision of methodological support for developing teachers' competencies for teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language.

Data provided by MES and the feedback from participants in this study suggest rather limited continuous teacher development in this area. Until now, relevant training has primarily been offered to a small number of teachers in areas with a historical concentration of asylum-





*Stamena from Bulgaria conducts an activity for Ukrainian refugee children at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub employs teachers and volunteers to help Ukrainian refugees integrate quickly into their host country.*

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seeking and refugee students with international protection. However, the recent enrollment of a large number of Ukrainian students in schools across the country has posed challenges for many teachers who may have limited experience in teaching non-native speakers. It is important to address these challenges proactively and effectively.

Teachers face challenges in their work due to the absence of established methodologies for teaching children who lack proficiency in Bulgarian or are illiterate. Furthermore, the availability of age-appropriate teaching aids for teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language is considered crucial for effective learning. According to the teachers interviewed for this study, the lack of authentic textbooks and learning aids specifically designed for studying Bulgarian as a foreign language significantly hinders their teaching efforts. Currently, they primarily use teaching aids in Bulgarian language as a foreign language and accompanying workbooks at levels A1, A2, and B1, provided by the UNHCR, and a Bulgarian language training program for foreigners, developed by Caritas in 2017. However, this program is not age-specific, as it is designed for both children and adults. A teaching aid for the initial stage at levels A1 and A2 is being developed under the National Program “Textbooks, Educational Sets, and Teaching Aids,” but at the time of the survey, this teaching aid has not been published yet. But overall, participants share the opinion that while the textbooks and

teaching aids themselves are important, the proper preparation of teachers to work with children for whom Bulgarian is not their mother tongue is of greater importance.

Various personal and contextual factors also impact the successful acquisition of the Bulgarian language. As indicated by the study participants, many asylum-seeking and refugee children lack the motivation to learn Bulgarian due to the perception that it won't be necessary for them in the future when they reach their desired final destination. In addition, survey findings highlights that children learn Bulgarian language more quickly and effectively when their parents encourage and support them. However, many parents do not speak Bulgarian and are unable to provide language support to their children, further affecting their language learning progress.

Overall, study results indicate that the lack of fluency in Bulgarian is one of the most important sources of disadvantage that adversely impacts the academic performance and overall well-being of asylum-seeking and refugee students. The presence of language barriers tends to amplify the impacts of other obstacles, including late-age immigration, disrupted or limited prior schooling, lack of parental support, and other disadvantages. Furthermore, the limited chances for students who enter the Bulgarian education system at a later age to acquire proficient Bulgarian language skills at an academic level may act as a barrier to their participation in tertiary education, as it impedes their ability to achieve high scores in national matriculation exams.

## Catching-up in School

Study findings indicate that due to language barriers many refugee students encounter substantial difficulties when dealing with academic material in the classroom, particularly when it involves concepts and references that are culturally or socially unfamiliar, such as lessons in Bulgarian language and literature, history, geography, chemistry, biology, etc. Moreover, according to the participants in the study, due to existing language barriers, some teachers also struggle to explain even basic terms and scientific concepts in a way that refugee children can understand. Based on the feedback from study participants, it has been observed that refugee children make the most successful progress in catching up with mathematics and foreign languages (English particularly).

The prolonged periods of school interruption and the lack of educational habits have a negative impact on the behavioural engagement of these students. Participants shared that such students often have attendance issues, struggle with concentration during class, and lack discipline, which also hinders their learning.

Another main obstacle to academic progress of refugee children in Bulgaria is related to the fact that the Bulgarian curricula are heavily focused on delivering subject knowledge to a homogenous group of students, which may not effectively meet the diverse needs of refugee or asylum-seeking children. The profile of these children is highly diverse, and this heterogeneity has been further amplified in recent years, particularly after the wave of refugees from Ukraine. The variations in the quality of instruction and the depth of curricula between the countries of origin and Bulgaria can also create discrepancies in the readiness of refugee students to effectively engage academically at school. However, there are no mechanisms in place to create flexible educational programs and individualized plans that can accommodate the varying academic needs of students who may be illiterate, have experienced interruptions in formal schooling, speak multiple languages, or have different levels of knowledge or cognitive abilities. As a result, teachers and school leaders may encounter difficulties in delivering effective support that is customized to the specific needs of each student. Study findings suggest that while there are teachers who make efforts to adapt their teaching to reflect the educational experience, culture and traditions of asylum-seeking and refugee students in their classes, many of these students struggle to understand the subject content. At the same time, respondents who offer educational support to children in SAR's reception centres and employ flexible and personalized approaches in their work



*Valeria from Dnipro, Ukraine, teaches Ukrainian refugee children at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub employs teachers and volunteers to help Ukrainian refugees integrate quickly into their host country.*

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report favourable outcomes. These findings are further supported by feedback from children who took part in the focus group, as they perceive the out-of-school learning opportunities provided by the teachers at the centre as highly beneficial.

Existing evidence suggests that refugee children and adolescents are better able to learn and make progress when they can build upon their prior learning and are consistently challenged to advance (OECD, 2018; Cerna, 2019). The results of the survey indicate inconsistent practices for ongoing monitoring and assessment of learning across school and teachers. It appears that teachers tend to rely more on ongoing assessment in subjects such as mathematics and foreign languages, where students are able to actively respond or complete tests. However, feedback received suggests that opportunities for ongoing assessment may be limited for students who have limited proficiency in Bulgarian, the primary language of instruction.

## Recommendations for Policies and Practices to Address Learning Needs

Bulgaria could consider implementing more comprehensive policies and procedures for the initial assessment of the prior knowledge and competencies of newly arrived refugee students. This would align with the practices across the EU. Many EU countries introduced compulsory assessment or provided detailed recommendations for such assessments, and half of the European education systems have developed concrete tools to help schools determine the educational and personal needs of newly arrived learners, including those from Ukraine (Eurydice, 2022). These measures would help ensure that the learning needs of these students are adequately addressed and supported.

It is important for Bulgaria to prioritize and invest in efficient, systematic, and effective models of language support for refugee students at all levels of education. Essential to supporting these students is the adoption of a comprehensive language learning approach that takes into account their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and goes beyond mere instruction in vocabulary and grammar, to include strategies for achieving cognitive academic language proficiency across diverse subjects. In addition, providing teachers with culturally and age-appropriate tools for ongoing assessment can enable them to effectively identify the language and learning support needs of individual students.

Bulgaria may consider implementing specialized catch-up, bridging, or accelerated education programs specifically designed for asylum-seeking or refugee students. Research indicates that the likelihood of refugee students staying in school and making progress is significantly higher when they have access to such programs (OECD; 2015). A preparatory

## Box 2. Examples of practices to assess educational needs of newly arrived students

**In Sweden**, the schools are required to conduct an initial evaluation of prior knowledge and experience of newly enrolled refugee students in order to appropriately place them in the correct year group and teaching cohort. The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) in co-operation with universities has produced a mapping materials to support this assessment process. The assessment is carried out in three steps, with steps 1 and 2 being mandatory for the initial assessment, while step 3 is optional and serves as supplementary support for subject teachers. In step 1, the school assesses the student's language proficiency and background experiences. This step provides the school with an overview of the student's prior educational experiences, language skills, interests, and expectations. In step 2, the basic literacy and numeracy skills are assessed. Both steps forms the foundation for determining the appropriate year group and teaching cohort for a newly arrived student in compulsory school or equivalent educational settings, as well as for allocating time among different subjects. On this basis, the principal of the school decides the educational trajectory, including whether the student will be partially placed in a separate class, or will enter a mainstream class with additional support measures. For example, if a student demonstrates good knowledge in a subject, they may be able to join regular classes in that subject with the added support of tutors in the student's native language. The mapping process also serves as a basis for planning instruction that aligns with the student's knowledge, circumstances, and requirements. The third step of the assessment is designed for subject teachers and is conducted at the student's school of placement. This step allows the teacher to gain insights into the student's proficiency level in a particular subject, enabling them to better plan the student's ongoing instruction. Although the use of the third step is optional for schools, it offers valuable support to subject teachers in tailoring their teaching approach according to the student's developmental progress.

**In the Netherlands**, some schools apply special procedures for assessing the prior education and social and family conditions of each child. They use intake interviews with parents to discuss a student's family background, personal details, and school history, including whether the student has attended a Dutch school before. The students' initial abilities are assessed through testing of their motor skills, reading and numeracy skills, and vocabulary. These schools also establish goals that students must achieve in order to transition to a mainstream school, preferably with peers of the same age. Additionally, factors such as didactic conditions, learning efficiency, and social-emotional development are considered when transferring students to mainstream schools.

*Sources: Swedish National Agency for Education <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/bedomning-i-grundskolan/bedomning-av-nyanlanda-elevers-kunskaper-i-grundskolan/kartlaggningsmaterial-for-nyanlanda-elever-i-grundskolan> Tudjman et al.,(2016). Multi-country Partnership to Enhance the Education of Refugee and Asylum-seeking Youth in Europe. Refugee Education in the Netherlands, p. 14-15, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10376.11520>*

language-focused program could be especially beneficial for lower and upper secondary school students as they need substantial language training to succeed in content courses. Such program could be organized during summer breaks or for short durations before transitioning to mainstream classes, providing additional support for their educational advancement. For example, drawing on successful experiences in other countries, Bulgaria could explore the possibility of organizing summer camps for refugee students, aimed at developing their proficiency in the Bulgarian language and helping them catch up with subject knowledge.

Bulgaria could explore the possibility of creating individualized development and learning plans for asylum-seeking and refugee students who enter the Bulgarian education system. Some of the participants in the study believe that it is necessary to adapt the curriculum for these students. One possible option for addressing learning needs of students, as identified by the participants in the study, is the provision of separate educational programs for them, which would initially offer intensive language training and gradually incorporate subjects such as mathematics, geography, history, etc. This, however, entails a substantial transformation of the current model of direct inclusion in the educational system, without offering pull-out or preparatory classes. Another alternative, identified by the study, is related to more active implementation of project-based learning, where refugee students are initially given the opportunity to work in their native language and gradually start performing project tasks in Bulgarian language.

It is particularly important to offer specialized teacher training programs, both during their initial studies or through in-service training, to ensure that educators are equipped with the necessary knowledge and competencies to effectively teach non-native speakers in their classrooms.

Regular monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and practices aimed at addressing the educational needs of asylum seeking and refugee children is crucial for ensuring their optimal educational outcomes and integration in schools.



# Addressing Social Needs

According to the survey findings, asylum-seeking and refugee children generally experience positive social interactions in Bulgarian schools. Principals and teachers involved in the study report implementing targeted efforts and practices to promote the inclusion of newly arrived refugee students in classrooms by strengthening their feelings of connectedness to schools, respecting their culture and creating encouraging and inclusive classroom environments. They also note that Bulgarian students are generally friendly and welcoming. Younger students tend to integrate more easily into school socially. Older students tend to face more challenges in social integration into their new school community. The existing language barrier is considered a major obstacle not only to learning, but also to the social integration of asylum-seeking and refugee students, as this limits their opportunities to communicate with their classmates.



*Ukrainian refugee children, from left to right, Arina, Stanislav, Diana, Anna, Ariana and Alyona, participate in activities at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub employs teachers and volunteers to help Ukrainian refugee children integrate quickly into their host country.*

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The feedback received indicates that many refugee students feel isolated or tend to self-isolate. Teachers share that some of these children are passive socially and put up a “protective barrier” even if their class is very tolerant. It is worth mentioning that the feeling of isolation is particularly notable among girls who wear hijab, as they feel that their religious beliefs and traditions are not acknowledged or respected by other students.

No significant cases of bullying or violence in schools have been reported, but some of the interviewees mention that refugee children may face heightened aggression, particularly in the premises of SAR’s reception centers.

Overall, the study findings indicate that some teachers don’t have the necessary training and experience to effectively work with refugee children in their classrooms, which hinders their ability to support their social integration. Some of the participants in the study provide anecdotal examples of cases where some teachers may isolate refugee students or do not intervene when these children are socially excluded or bullied by their peers. Similar incidents are reported by the refugee children who participated in the focus group. For instance, a student in the first grade shares that during breaks, the teacher takes the other children to play outside, leaving him alone in the classroom.

## Recommendations for Policies and Practices to Address Social Needs

Schools could implement social integration programs, such as mentorship programs, buddy systems, and community engagement activities, to promote positive interactions and friendships between refugee children and their Bulgarian peers.

In addition, schools should be equipped with effective mechanisms to prevent discrimination and bullying against refugee children in schools and communities. This can be achieved by improving the school climate, increasing teachers’ preparedness, and taking appropriate measures to address any instances of discrimination or harassment.

Policymakers can foster an inclusive and supportive environment for refugee children by providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities, which can promote their language development, social integration, and overall well-being. Schools may be encouraged to partner with local community organizations and NGOs to offer a variety of extra-curricular activities that cater to the interests and cultural backgrounds of refugee children.



# Addressing Emotional Needs

The trauma experienced by refugee children can impede their ability to learn (McBrien, 2005). Research has consistently shown that forced migration has significant mental health implications for refugee children, with higher prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depressive disorders compared to host populations. However, there is significant variability in prevalence rates due to the diverse experiences these children may have had in their home countries, during their journey, and upon arrival in the host country. Additionally, variables like presence of caregivers or family members, and unaccompanied status can further influence the mental health considerations for refugee children (Fazel, 2018).

Bulgaria does not currently implement specific policies and practices aimed at evaluating the need for psychosocial support among recently arrived asylum-seeking and refugee students enrolled in schools. However, the Ministry of Education and Science does offer hotlines that provide psychological support to refugee children and parents. There are six hotlines operated by MES, located in Burgas, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Stara Zagora, which are staffed by over 40 specialists. Initially established to provide assistance and advice related to education system situations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, these hotlines have been re-organized to provide support to parents and children from Ukraine. The activity is supported by psychologists from the National Mobile Group for Psychological Support at the Ministry of Education and Science, who possess expertise and extensive experience in crisis intervention<sup>9</sup>.

Insights obtained from interviews with school principals, teachers, and social workers reveal that asylum-seeking and refugee students who have experienced trauma related to separation or loss often exhibit signs of distraction, self-isolation, difficulties in adaptation, and academic setbacks. The school principals are required to offer free psychological support to these children, as needed, along with other activities aimed at supporting their general personal development, including resource support for those with special education needs. These procedures are in line with those applicable to Bulgarian children. However, schools are not equipped with specific tools and screening mechanisms to detect psychological or emotional problems. This hampers their ability to effectively identify the type of psychosocial support that may be required for refugee students, taking into consideration that the variability and

<sup>9</sup> <https://web.mon.bg/bg/100809>

severity of their psychological needs may differ significantly from those of Bulgarian students.

Furthermore, survey results indicate that although many schools offer access to school psychologists, they lack structured practices to provide targeted support services to address the trauma that refugee students may have experienced.

Schools can play a crucial role in promoting positive social-peer relationships and fostering a sense of belonging among asylum-seeking and refugee students, which can greatly contribute to their emotional well-being. However, the survey findings indicate that participants perceive that many teachers do not feel adequately equipped to effectively work with children who have experienced trauma or create a supportive educational environment that helps these children feel secure despite their past traumatic experiences. On one hand, teachers generally lack the necessary skills to address trauma. On the other hand, some participants indicated that many teachers are afraid of the topic and do not see it as their responsibility.

Overall, the study findings suggest that schools tend to view provision of psychological support for students as non-traditional activities. As a result, the topic of trauma and mental health of refugee children is often overlooked in schools, and teachers typically do not seek guidance from specialists on how to effectively support these children.

## Recommendations for Policies and Practices to Effectively Address Emotional Needs

In addition to the Hotlines, operated by the MES, Bulgaria could explore the possibility of deploying mobile/intervention teams of experts to support schools and teachers in offering psychosocial assistance to refugee students, similar to the programs introduced in Austria and Slovakia as outlined in Box 3. Schools could also benefit from provision of customized tools and screening mechanisms to identify the psychological or emotional needs of asylum seeking and refugee students, as well as with guidelines and instructions on how to address these needs.

Bulgaria could also consider providing targeted teacher training to address the emotional needs of refugee students. This training needs to focus on raising awareness and understanding of the impact of the refugee experience on learning and behaviour, as well as the role of school and classroom teachers in promoting recovery from trauma. Additionally, strategies for addressing barriers to learning due to the traumatic experiences and disrupted schooling of refugee students should be included in the training.

### Box 3. Examples of practices to address emotional needs

**In Austria**, the Ministry of Education implements a specialized program that deploys Mobile Intercultural Teams (MIT) to schools with a significant population of immigrant students. These teams provide valuable support to teachers and administrators who work with immigrant and refugee children, including the provision of qualified psychologists to assist students who have experienced trauma or challenges. The support provided by MITs may vary and can encompass teacher advice, individual casework with students, and workshops to enhance the classroom environment. MITs also engage with parents of immigrant and refugee students to facilitate their integration into the school community, often acting as language intermediaries between students, parents, and the school. Selection criteria for MIT employees include experience with diverse groups, language proficiency, familiarity with the Austrian school system, networking in psychosocial care systems, conflict resolution and mediation skills, intercultural competences, experience in working with refugees or migrants, and team orientation.

**In Slovakia**, provision of psychosocial assistance to Ukrainian refugee students in school is ensured by intervention teams. There are at least 7 teams in each region. Each intervention team consists of between three and eight experts (i.e. psychologists or special educators who have experience with crisis intervention). They are able to assist teachers of refugee learners in helping their students cope with the impacts of the war. In addition, Ukrainian-speaking experts are available to assist each intervention team.

**In Slovenia**, the National Education Institute of Slovenia has been aiding schools in working with Ukrainian refugee students. The institute's staff have been responding to the needs of schools in terms of providing advice and recommendations on how to work in groups and classes that are heterogeneous in terms of language and culture. They have organised thematic meetings with individual education staff members on this topic. They have also made available video packages on the topic of creating safe and encouraging learning environments that empower teachers to support students in balancing emotions in challenging situations.

**In Croatia**, the Ministry of Science and Education and the Education and Teacher Training Agency published, in March 2022, a document containing guidelines, instructions, recommendations and proposals for activities to be implemented by teachers and other educational professionals in primary and secondary schools, with a view to providing timely and effective support to children and young people affected by the war in Ukraine. The document addresses talking to students about the war in Ukraine and advising parents on how to talk to their children about it. It includes recommendations on how to show patience, honesty and understanding and how to provide support to students.

*Sources: Cerna, L. (2019), "Refugee education: Integration models and practices in OECD countries", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 203, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/a3251a00-en>.*

*Eurydice (2022). Supporting refugee learners from Ukraine in schools in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.*

# Parental Engagement

Parental engagement is a crucial factor in the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of asylum-seeking and refugee students, as evidenced by numerous studies (McBrien, 2005; OECD, 2018; Cerna, 2019; OECD 2021; European Commission, 2022; Eurydice; 2022). Studies show that refugee students benefit from parental support, even if it may not be expressed in traditional ways, such as involvement in schools. Regardless of their educational background, parents who provide strategic direction, support their children's education, and value learning can facilitate their children's integration into the school system of the host country, and create a positive environment for academic, social, and emotional development. Schools and teachers that proactively share information with parents, maintain regular communication, and make efforts to understand students' backgrounds can also encourage parental engagement. However, some parental factors, such as trauma experienced by refugee parents, language barriers, and cultural differences, can pose challenges to refugee children's success in education (McBrien, 2005).

The results of the study suggest that the proficiency of Bulgarian, English or Russian language, as well as the level of education of refugee parents, significantly impacts their ability to



*Sophia started 5th grade at the St. Cyril and Methodius middle school in Dobrich, Bulgaria in September 2023. The school is the oldest in the city, since 1872. Sophia, her mother, older brother, and father arrived in Bulgaria on 1 March 2022 from Kyiv.*  
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support their children's learning, along with the time available due to family and work commitments, and their understanding of the schooling system. According to the principals and teachers involved in the study, Ukrainian parents tend to be more engaged in their children's education. A large portion of these parents are highly educated, have high ambitions for their children's education, and often seek contact with the school. The fact that many of these parents speak English and Russian also helps for their communication with the schools. On the other hand, a lower level of parental engagement is observed among parents of refugee children from the Middle East, mainly due to the language barrier and the fact that some parents are illiterate. They often don't speak any other language and communication with teachers is often not possible. Additionally, some of the participants reveal that there are parents who often prioritize their work with younger children or household chores over ensuring regular school attendance for their school-aged child. At the same time, there are illiterate parents who recognize the value of education and strive to support their children.

The participants in the study share fragmented practices for involving parents, such as conducting meetings with parents at the premises of the SAR's reception centers, organized by an NGO, organizing open days at individual schools, and in some cases utilizing educational mediators, among others. It is reported that practice exists where SAR employees at reception centers communicate with schools and attend school meetings instead of parents.

The study findings suggest that there are limited opportunities for parents to interact and be integrated into the school community. The school system lacks structured efforts to engage parents of refugee children, with a significant portion of this work being carried out by the non-governmental sector.

## Recommendations for Involving Parents

Actively involving parents and experienced community partners in the learning process can significantly enhance students' learning outcomes. Existing evidence suggests that parental involvement in language stimulation is an important feature of any successful language support programme (OECD, 2015). Bulgaria could consider expanding the role and functions of educational mediators to further support parental engagement and promote the integration of children. Stimulating more active community group support can help engaging parents with low literacy.

By fostering collaborations between schools, parents, non-governmental organizations and other community partners, a supportive ecosystem can be established to promote the learning of the Bulgarian language and provide appropriate educational support to students to advance academically.

# Special Case: Unaccompanied and/or Separated Children

Integration of unaccompanied and/or separated children is a special case that deserves focused attention and targeted interventions. These children, who are often displaced and without the support of their families, face unique challenges and require specific strategies to facilitate their successful integration. Providing appropriate education, care, and psychosocial support during the asylum and resettlement process is crucial for promoting the mental health, psychosocial adjustment, and educational attainment of young unaccompanied refugees (Pastoor, 2017).

There is currently no specific monitoring process at the national or local level in Bulgaria focusing on access and participation of UASC in education. As a result, detailed data on the type of institutions they are enrolled in, gender/age breakdown, country of origin, and other relevant information is not available.

Based on the observations of the study participants, it is evident that a considerable number of unaccompanied children lack access to education in Bulgaria. According to the insights



*Five-year-olds Matvei, and Zlata, participate in activities at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub employs teachers and volunteers to help Ukrainian refugee children learn the Bulgarian language and manage their homework, so that they can integrate quickly into their host country.*

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provided by the interviewees, it was emphasized that a substantial majority of unaccompanied children arriving in Bulgaria opt to continue their journey to other European countries and show little interest in enrolling in school. Furthermore, even among those who do enrol, there is a significant risk of dropping out, with many ceasing to attend school shortly after. The interviewed experts working with unaccompanied children share that these children face a significant lack of motivation and desire to attend school. The absence of family support and the challenge of not knowing the Bulgarian language are considered crucial factors contributing to their quick disengagement, even among those who initially enrol in school. Many of these children attend school for a short period, but as they struggle to cope with various challenges, they increasingly feel overwhelmed and eventually decide to drop out. Additionally, the lack of orientation and mentorship further compounds the challenges faced by these children. Unaccompanied boys face additional factors that impede their education. Due to a lack of alternatives, they quickly engage in employment as their primary means of support.

Some of the interviewed experts believe that UASC have a greater chance of being retained and integrated into the educational system if they are not placed in reception centres operated by the State Agency for Refugees. According to the feedback from study participants, these centres tend to create an environment where leaving Bulgaria becomes a prevailing sentiment, which can negatively impact the children's prospects for education and integration. This is especially valid for unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan, who, according to expert observations, have a brief stay in Bulgaria (sometimes just weeks).

At the same time, participating experts share cases of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who have been accommodated in family-type centres and have never been placed in refugee centres. Some of these children, benefiting from active social work, make the decision to stay in Bulgaria, enrol in school, and learn the Bulgarian language. There are reports of cases where such children have successfully completed their education and choose to live and work in Bulgaria.

## Recommendations for Policies and Practices to Effectively Integrate Unaccompanied and/or Separated Children

It is crucial for Bulgaria to give priority to establishing a collaborative and systematic approach, with the involvement of all relevant authorities, to effectively collect and monitor data on the enrollment of refugee and unaccompanied children in education. This initiative should aim to ensure comprehensive coverage across all educational levels.

By focusing on this specific demographic, policymakers and stakeholders can develop targeted integration strategies that address the underlying factors contributing to increasing

inflows of increasing proportion of unaccompanied boys seeking international protection in Bulgaria. It is important to understand the reasons behind the disproportionate number of unaccompanied boys entering Bulgaria and to take into account their specific vulnerabilities and potential contributing factors.

Collaborative efforts between pertinent government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations are pivotal in formulating and executing inclusive policies and initiatives to safeguard and assist unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), with a specific focus on unaccompanied boys seeking international protection. Customized interventions should encompass the development of dedicated support programs designed to address their mental health, educational, and social integration requirements. Additionally, provisions should be made to ensure their access to legal aid, protection against exploitation and abuse, and the provision of secure and stable living environments.

Ministry of Education and Science may develop special funding program to support linguistic and inclusion school-based activities targeting both unaccompanied children and newly arrived students (see Box 4).

One of the options, particularly for adolescent unaccompanied boys, is to create a fast track for vocational education and provide opportunities for obtaining professional qualifications. This approach can offer a viable pathway for these children to remain in Bulgaria and lead a fulfilling life. However, it is important to acknowledge that currently, Bulgaria lacks sufficient offerings of “fast tracks” for vocational qualifications for individuals who have dropped out of the educational system early. Additionally, there are regulatory barriers that hinder the participation of individuals with low educational backgrounds and qualifications in vocational education, thus limiting the possibilities for young refugees or asylum seekers to acquire professional qualifications. It is necessary to reassess the requirement for a minimum educational level for entry into training programs for specific professions or for the initial level of professional qualifications.

#### Box 4. Examples of practices to address integration of UASC

**In Italy,** The Ministry of Education released two funding calls in 2015, each amounting to €500,000, inviting schools to submit projects with the following objectives: a) teaching Italian as a second language with a focus on newly arrived students, and b) promoting integration and providing linguistic/psychological support to unaccompanied children. In November 2016, the ministry issued a single funding call for €1 million to support school-based activities related to language instruction and “inclusion,” targeting both unaccompanied children and newly arrived students.

*Source: Grigt, S. (2017). The journey of hope: Education for refugee and unaccompanied children in Italy. Education International Research*



# Integration in Bulgarian Education System from the Perspective of Refugee Students

As part of the study, a focus group was conducted with seven children between the ages of 11 and 15, who are currently residing in a SAR's reception centre in Sofia. Prior to coming to Bulgaria, these children have attended school in Turkey. In Bulgaria, they attend school near the refugee centre where they are accommodated. All of them like their school in Turkey more than their current school. None of them knows the name of their Bulgarian school.

All of these children are enrolled in much lower grades, typical for students that are 3 years younger. Specifically, two children aged 10 and 11 are enrolled in first grade; two children



*Sophia started 5th grade at the St. Cyril and Methodius middle school in Dobrich, Bulgaria in September 2023. The school is the oldest in the city, since 1872. Sophia, her mother, older brother, and father arrived in Bulgaria on 1 March 2022 from Kyiv.*

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aged 12 and 13 are enrolled in third grade; two children aged 13 are enrolled in fourth grade; and one 15-year-old child attends fifth grade. For some of these children, the discrepancy compared to the grades they attended in Turkey is significant: for example, one student studied in ninth grade in Turkey but was placed in fifth grade in Bulgaria; another child attended fifth grade in Turkey but was enrolled in first grade in Bulgaria. None of them have undergone an interview to determine their level of knowledge and skills upon enrolment in school.

All children start attending school without prior preparation and speak Bulgarian at a very basic level. They have additional Bulgarian language lessons twice a week, but sometimes the lessons are not held. The overall assessment of the children is that these additional lessons are helpful to them. However, they tend to prefer the additional Bulgarian language lessons provided informally by out-of school teachers at the reception centre over those at school.

The children describe their overall experience in school as positive, but admit that to a large extent, this experience “depends on the teacher.” At the same time, they consider their involvement in school rather formal, as they often do not understand what is being taught. They share that they often struggle to understand the meaning of what is being taught in class because the teachers speak too fast. They attend school regularly, but they do not actively participate in class activities. All of them share that they face the most difficulties in regular Bulgarian language classes, while they find math and English language lessons much easier. When encountering difficulties, these students tend to refrain from asking questions, often due to their inability to formulate their inquiries in Bulgarian.

The ongoing assessment practices seem limited. As per feedback from children, many teachers do not assess them or administer tests while other students are being tested.

The children acknowledge that the support of their teachers plays a crucial role in their academic success. However, they also note that the most helpful support comes from teachers who work informally with them at the SAR’s centre. Although some teachers at the school do offer additional support to their learning, there are situations where teachers state that they lack enough time to provide assistance.

These children have a relatively low level of literacy in their native language because they did not attend school in their home country. Unlike Turkey, where they had Arabic language courses, they do not have the opportunity to develop their native language in Bulgaria. Moreover, teachers at school sometimes make remarks to them not to speak to each other in Arabic.

Overall, children have positive social experiences in their school, but feel isolated and do not have many friends among their Bulgarian classmates. Girls who wear hijabs feel particularly isolated.

Despite the expectation that they may not remain in their Bulgarian school for long, most children still make earnest efforts in their studies due to their dreams and aspirations of becoming doctors, engineers, or police officers.



Seven-year-old Anna from Ukraine participates in activities at the Integriko centre in Varna, Bulgaria. The training hub employs teachers and volunteers to help Ukrainian refugee children learn the Bulgarian language and manage their homework, so that they can integrate quickly into their host country.

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# Conclusions

Bulgaria has seen a significant rise in the number of asylum-seekers and refugee children, especially in the aftermath of the large-scale arrival of children and youth who have been displaced from Ukraine due to Russia's invasion. The changing profiles of refugees, short-term stay intentions, disrupted educational pathways, trauma-related needs, and the unique challenges faced by unaccompanied children all impact the integration of refugee children into the Bulgarian education system.

The findings of the study reveal that while Bulgaria offers wide access to the national education system for asylum-seeking and refugee children, a significant proportion of newly arrived children still do not enrol in formal education. Those who do enrol face significant challenges in academic settings, including fragmented approaches in determining their educational needs, inappropriate grade placements, language barriers, and a curriculum that may not effectively address their diverse needs. The absence of flexible educational programs and individualized plans further compounds these difficulties.

The study results highlight that the lack of fluency in Bulgarian is a major source of disadvantage for asylum-seeking and refugee students, negatively impacting their academic performance and overall well-being. Furthermore, language barriers tend to amplify the impacts of other obstacles, including late-age immigration, disrupted or limited prior schooling, and lack of parental support. Bulgarian language training may be insufficient, irregular, and inconsistently delivered, hindering the development of cognitive academic language proficiency, which is crucial for success in school environments. Limited teachers' experience in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language, lack of appropriate teaching aids, and limited access to extra support for students with learning difficulties are also important challenges to the efficient development of Bulgarian language skills and catching up in school.

Moreover, inconsistent practices for initial diagnostics and ongoing monitoring and assessment of knowledge and skills, as well as the heterogeneity among refugee students in terms of educational backgrounds, language proficiency, and cognitive abilities, pose challenges for teachers and school leaders in delivering effective support.

Addressing these challenges and providing tailored support to refugee students is essential for improving their academic outcomes and overall well-being in the Bulgarian education system. A holistic approach, including coordinated policies and various interventions such as raising awareness, providing practical support, addressing misconceptions, creating

inclusive environments, offering flexible learning options, improving monitoring, and providing ongoing support to parents, is needed to promote the enrollment of refugee children in pre-school and school education. Bulgaria may benefit from implementing comprehensive policies that assess the prior knowledge and competencies of newly arrived refugee students, provide language support that considers their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, offer specialized catch-up, bridging, or accelerated education programs, create individualized development and learning plans, provide specialized teacher training programs, and conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of policies to ensure optimal educational outcomes and integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children in schools. These policies should be aligned with practices across the EU and draw on successful experiences from other countries. Taking such measures will help ensure that refugee students in Bulgaria receive appropriate support and opportunities for their educational advancement and integration into the education system.

Enhanced policies, practices, and support systems are needed in Bulgarian schools to effectively address the social and psychosocial needs of refugee children. This includes implementing specific tools, screening mechanisms, and structured practices to address trauma, increasing awareness, training, and guidance for teachers, and integrating trauma-informed practices and targeted support services to promote emotional well-being and positive social-peer relationships. Schools can promote positive interactions between refugee children and Bulgarian peers through social integration programs like mentorship programs, buddy systems, and community engagement activities, while also addressing discrimination and bullying through improved school climate, teacher preparedness, and appropriate measures. Expanding the role of educational mediators and fostering collaborations between schools, parents, NGOs, and community partners can enhance students' learning outcomes and promote parental engagement, leading to a supportive ecosystem for academic advancement and language learning in Bulgaria.

Setting standards for structured data collection and data-sharing across institutions in Bulgaria and establishing appropriate monitoring indicators can provide valuable insights into the specific needs of refugee students and inform effective education responses to support their successful integration into the education system.

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Institute for Research in Education

Assenka Hristova, Velizara Georgieva



**UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria**

[bulso@unhcr.org](mailto:bulso@unhcr.org)

2, Pozitano Square, Sofia 1000

[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org) | [www.unhcr.org/bg](http://www.unhcr.org/bg)