Attitudes towards Refugees in Bulgaria: Mainstream and Social Media Analysis

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Abstract

The international environment, characterized by a large number of disturbances and security shortages of all aspects, force people around the world to flee their countries of origin. This large number of newcomers raises the important question of local community attitudes and perceptions. Data has shown that migration processes became particularly relevant in 2014-2016 as a result of the mass uprisings along the Arab world (2010) when more than a million people sought asylum in the European Union (EU) and after 2020, marked by a new rise in the number of asylum seekers after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

By conducting an analysis of the public opinion of Bulgarians and discussing the attitudes towards different nationalities of migrant in mainstream and social media, this paper shows the existence of predominantly negative connotations to representatives of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries and a shift from positive to negative sentiments to Ukrainians.

Keywords: refugees, asylum seekers, public attitudes, mainstream media, social media, media analysis, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

The surrounding environment, characterized by a large number of disturbing factors, high level of uncertainty, and security shortages in numerous aspects, forces millions of people to migrate. The International Organization for Migration's 2024 World Migration Report shows that as of 2020 there are about 281 million international migrants in the world, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population. It is worth mentioning that part of these people are forcibly displaced, within and out of their country of origin, because of conflict, violence, political or economic instability as well as climate change and other disasters. The report also reveals that in 2022, there were 117 million displaced people globally, and 71.2 million internally displaced people. In addition, the number of asylum-seekers has risen from 4.1 million in 2020 to 5.4 million in 2022, which is an increase of more than 30 per cent (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024).

The migration to the EU Member States reached two clearly distinct peaks during the last decade - the first in 2014-2016 and the second - after 2020. Although Bulgaria is not among the countries that are huge migrant acceptors between 2014 and 2024, as it has 121 945 first-time asylum applications (Eurostat, 2024). In addition to these asylum seekers, as of the end of September 2024 Bulgaria registered nearly 200 000 Ukrainians who have applied for temporary protection on its territory (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2024).

Such a huge inflow of people turns the notions of reception, welcoming and attitudes particularly relevant. Looking at the attitudes to refugees is of great importance since they have a high impact on the public opinion on migration policy, as well as influences on the sustainability of the proposed policies of the host countries. Based on the understanding of attitudes, of attitude changes and of the role of different determinants to newcomers, professionals are able to predict the outcome of program interventions - their success or limitations (Moise, Dennison, & Kriesi, 2023).

Social research has investigated the factors that influence public attitudes towards refugees and has already shown that accurate understanding of the social context in the host country is crucial for the success of the politics of acceptance and integration (Kaim et al., 2024). Public attitudes might vary from completely negative and conservative, rejecting the arrival of foreigners in the country to such that protect their rights, independent of the existence of protective regulation.

The general vision of Bulgaria is of a country with predominantly negative public attitudes towards refugees[1], mainly because the incomers are not seen as people willing to stay in the country, but as temporary residents. This is the conclusion of the joint research of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) conducted in 2019, summing up that most Bulgarians have never communicated with refugees, henceforth lacking first-hand information and awareness of refugees' plight, they base their attitudes predominantly on information shared by the media and on existing stereotypes (European Commission [EC], 2020).

In this respect, the need to analyze public opinions both across social media and the content in the mainstream media becomes even more relevant. A more comprehensive view of the specific situation in Bulgaria requires also the inclusion and conduction of in-depth analysis of key quantitative data, including the number of persons who sought asylum, their nationality, gender and age structure, statuses granted by type, as well as the country's capacity to accommodate those groups of people.

2. Literature Review

The topic related to asylum seekers has a multidisciplinary nature, as it can be considered and studied at different levels - economic, social, political, international, national, etc. It is precisely because of this complexity that it is of interest to researchers working in different scientific fields. At the EU level the topic gained particular popularity in mid-2010s, when the EU faced the so-called migration crisis, caused by the Arab Spring that had started a few years earlier. The events in Syria and the civil war there caused unprecedented flows of people seeking asylum, which polarized the opinions of the EU countries on the recipe for solving the problem.

As a response to this situation, the EU started to conclude strategic agreements with third countries, for example the EU-Turkey agreement issued in 2016, according to which Turkey would detain migrants on its territory in exchange for tranche funding from the EU (Legislative Train Schedule, 2016). After certain calming of the situation, in the years after 2021, Bulgaria faced another growth of asylum applications, which in turn inflamed the interest of the scholars working on migration and gave them additional stimulus for scientific studies. Some

However, an insignificant part of the studies released so far have a relation to the Bulgarian citizen's attitudes towards newcomers. An example for a national representative study is the one, cited in the introduction, conducted by BAS and UNHCR in 2019. Some scholars give partial attention "to the society's attitudes to refugees" combining their studies with other issues like national legal framework and policy decisions in the field of social and cultural integration (Erolova, 2019). On the other hand, other researchers claim that the personal contact is of a significant importance, as the lack of it leads to the formation of representations influenced by the negative media coverage of the refugee topic, which engenders fears, rejection and unwillingness to live together (Nakova, 2018). The ability of media to create powerful images and form attitudes towards the Other and the perception of Otherness is also part of other valuable studies (Kamenarova, 2014). Another study that is focused on Bulgarian citizens' perceptions, however, concretely after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the subsequent inflow of asylum seekers to Bulgaria claims that the lack of communication between authorities and local population is a key factor for that issue (Dimitrov & Pavlov, 2023).

As an integral and indivisible part of the attitudes is the integration of the newcomers. In this regard it should be pointed out that some authors choose to focus their attention on the purely economic integration and the related challenges (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017), both before and after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Dimitrov & Pavlov, 2023).

Despite the fact that this topic has a growing interest among researchers over the last few years, it should be stressed that the examination of the attitudes of the local population remains poor. This paper aims to present more information on the dynamics of attitudes to refugees in Bulgaria which is expected to facilitate the process of the overall integration.

3. Methodology

This study has two parts: the first one is a desk research that makes a review on the current situation of the refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria, analyzing official data collected by the state institutions and some organizations working with and for refugees. The second part is focused on data, based on the analysis of mainstream and social media content, conducted between January 2022 and April 2024.

The main objective is to analyze and track of the perceptions of the media and users of social networks about refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Bulgaria. The scope of the analysis is based on data from social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter), online news media and forums. The tools for data extraction are Talkwalker, Crowdtangle, Open Access Tools (OSINT), and desktop research. For the purpose of data extraction, precise search strings are created, and

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[1] In this article the terms "refugee" and "asylum seekers" are used as labels, both falling in the category of externally displaced individuals.

the data is filtered based on keywords, volume of mentions, attitude analysis (positive, negative, neutral), and lexical analysis - most frequently repeated words and expressions. Additional strings were used in the build process to limit irrelevant content.

The data analysis checks the number of mentions and their distribution over time. In addition, a sentiment analysis is conducted: Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithms were used to classify the sentiment of posts. Moreover, a certain volume of data was also processed manually - to check and correct the set attitude. Last but not least, thematic analysis - recurring themes and narratives in the discussions were identified.

The collected data is visualized through charts, graphs and word clouds, as well as excerpts from various articles, quotes, mentions for illustrative purposes. Data on the asylum seekers' number, age structure and nationality is additionally included and analyzed.

4. 2014-2023 Asylum Seekers' Situation in Bulgaria

Migration processes have been and will probably remain an integral part of the evolution of humanity and the development of societies. However, at the beginning of the 1950s, after the Second World War, which forced an unprecedented number of people to migrate, processes began to regulate this forced displacement and build refugee rights, which were laid down in the 1951 Convention and the Protocol of 1967. These documents subsequently became the basis for a number of international and national laws and regulations. In this respect, depending on the motivations for leaving their habitual residence, migrants can fall into different categories, with asylum seekers making up a significant proportion of the total, since, as mentioned in the introduction, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide, as of 2022, is 117 million. As data on Table 1 reveals, the EU and Bulgaria are not an exception of these trends.

Table 1. Number of persons who sought asylum for the first time in the Republic of Bulgaria and the EU for the period 2013-2023

Year	Number	
	Bulgaria	*EU-27*
2013	6980	-
2014	10 805	530 560
2015	20 160	1 216 860
2016	18 990	1 166 815
2017	3470	620 265
2018	2465	564 115
2019	2075	631 285
2020	3460	417 070
2021	10 890	537 355
2022	20 260	881 220
2023	22 390	1 049 020
Total	121 945	7 614 565

Source: Eurostat

It could be seen that there are two significant peaks of the number of people seeking asylum both in the EU and Bulgaria. The relatively parallel increase and decrease of this indicator shows that the processes of immigration to Bulgaria follow the EU trend. Proportionally, however, the country remains among the least affected Member States, since approximately only 1.6% of those who applied for asylum in the EU did so in Bulgaria. The potential reasons could vary from a lack of accommodation capacity, difficult access to social assistance and health care, impossibility of

training and educational development, but also low solidarity initiatives, closed community and refusal of understanding the refugees' problems by the locals.

Nevertheless, as the focus of this study is Bulgaria, it is good to note that the number of those who applied for protection in Bulgaria between 2014 and 2016 amounted to 49 955, and those from 2021 to 2023 to 53 540. Calculated as a percentage of the total for the entire 11-year period, which amounted to 121 945, it can be summarized that nearly 85% of asylum seekers in the country applied during the six peak years. In this regard, such a large inflow rates, especially in mid-2010s and early 2020s arouses public interest on the opinion of local citizens, presumably the existence of negative rhetoric.

It is worth mentioning that the diversity of nationalities of those arriving in the country may also affect the attitudes of locals. In Figure 1 is presented data on the most common citizenship of people who applied for asylum in the country.
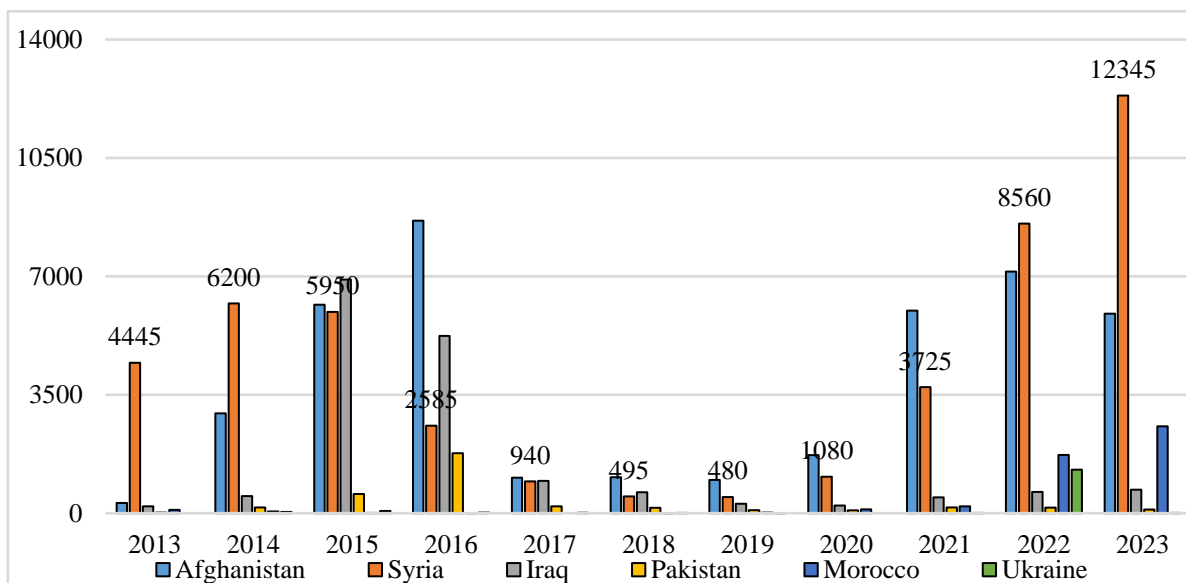

Figure 1. Number of persons seeking asylum in the Republic of Bulgaria by nationalities for the period 2013-2023

Source: Eurostat

Figure 1 shows that four countries of origin clearly stand out in the number of person asylums - namely Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Morocco. In four of the years covered by the study - 2013, 2014, 2022 and 2023 - Syrians were the most numerous, with a total of 31 550 in these four years alone. On the other hand, in 2015, the most common nationality is Iraqi, and between 2016-2021 those from Afghanistan with a total number for the six years – 19 450. In this regard, it can be noted that certain events in both countries are fundamental to emigration. In Syria, this is the civil war that started as a result of the so-called Arab Spring from the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. As for the situation in Afghanistan and more specifically the increase in the number of Afghans who sought asylum in Bulgaria in the years after 2020, it can be said that the main reason is the withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. These processes began in February 2020, when the United States of America (USA) and the Taliban signed an agreement to withdraw international forces from Afghanistan no later than May 2021. The actual process began in April 2021, when the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and NATO decided to withdraw all allied troops from the country within a few months (North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], 2022). Chronologically, this coincides with the increase in the number of Afghans applying for protection in Bulgaria.

Another important clarification that should be made here concerns Ukrainian citizens. There is a logical explanation for their low number, and it is expressed in the Decision of the Council of Ministers (CoM) No. 144 of March 10, 2022, on granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine (Council of Ministers [CoM], 2022). This decision was taken by the Council of the EU as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. In this regard, data on the number of decisions taken to grant temporary protection to Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria for the period March - December 2022 are presented in Figure 2.
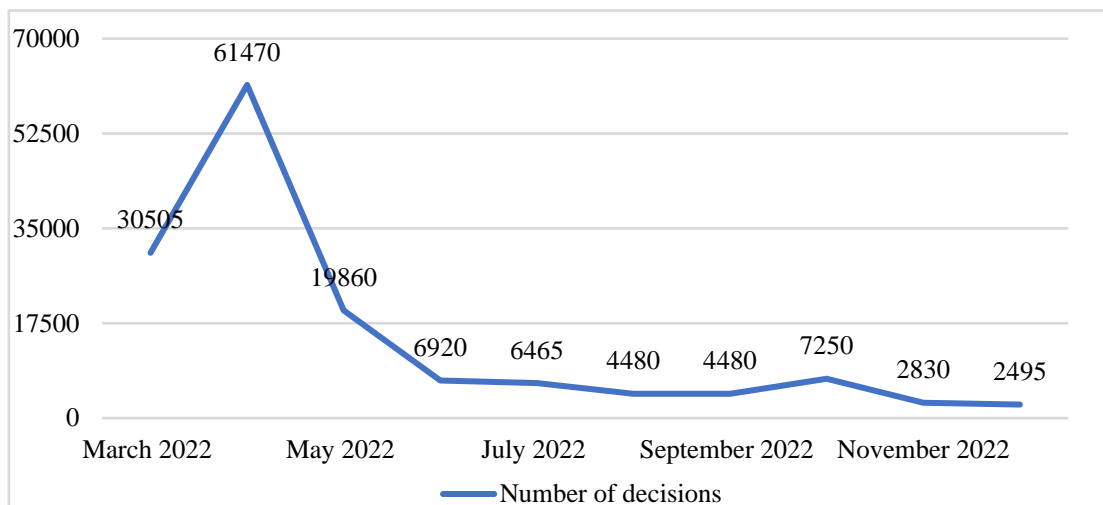
Figure 2. Number of decisions to grant temporary protection to Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria for the period March-December 2022

Source: Eurostat

As can be seen from Figure 2, that the peak of the influx of Ukrainians to Bulgaria was in April, when over 60 000 of them received the status of temporary protection in the country. In the months until the end of 2022, a significant decline was observed, however, as of September 2024, the total number of decisions taken jumped to nearly 200 000, as mentioned in the introduction.

The importance of a better understanding of the influence of the incoming people seeking asylum segregated by their country of origin is important for public perceptions with regard to the media analysis, since a relationship can be sought between the number of individual nationalities by year and the positive or negative opinions towards them in the same period. However, in order to present the situation more comprehensively, it is worth analyzing the gender structure of the newly arrived in Bulgaria. Figure 3 presents this indicator specifically for people arriving from countries other than Ukraine.
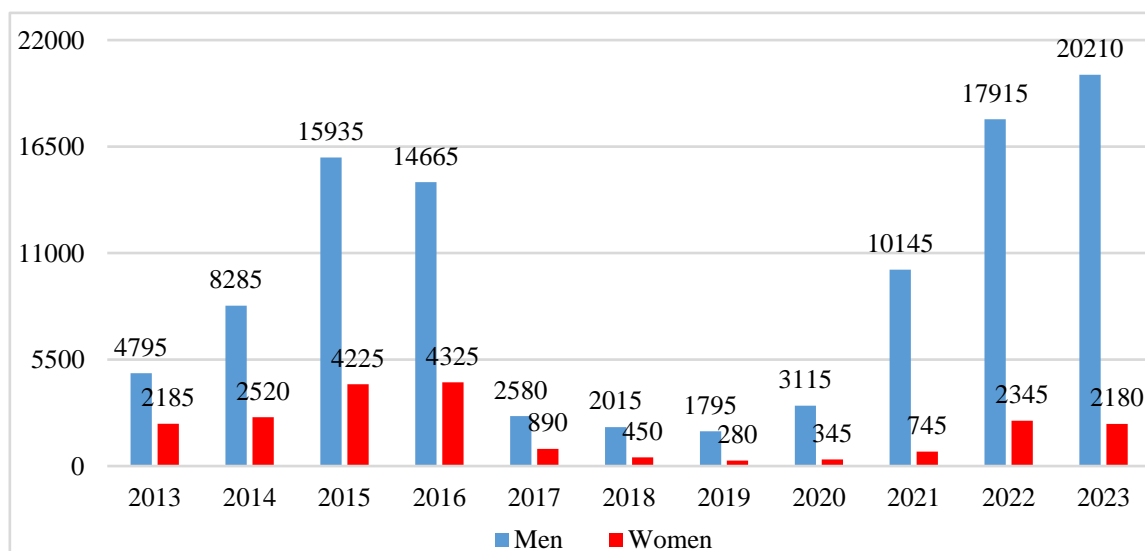

Figure 3. Gender structure of persons who sought asylum for the first time in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2013-2023

Source: Eurostat

The data in Figure 3 shows that there is a significant priority of men over women. The main reason could be the risk factor: unsafe travel, encounters with smugglers, illegal deeds, etc. Men from countries such as Afghanistan and Syria

usually emigrate first and by successful arrival prove existing relationship with their families - women and children, who then easily enter the country legally, taking advantage of the legal procedures to reunite families.

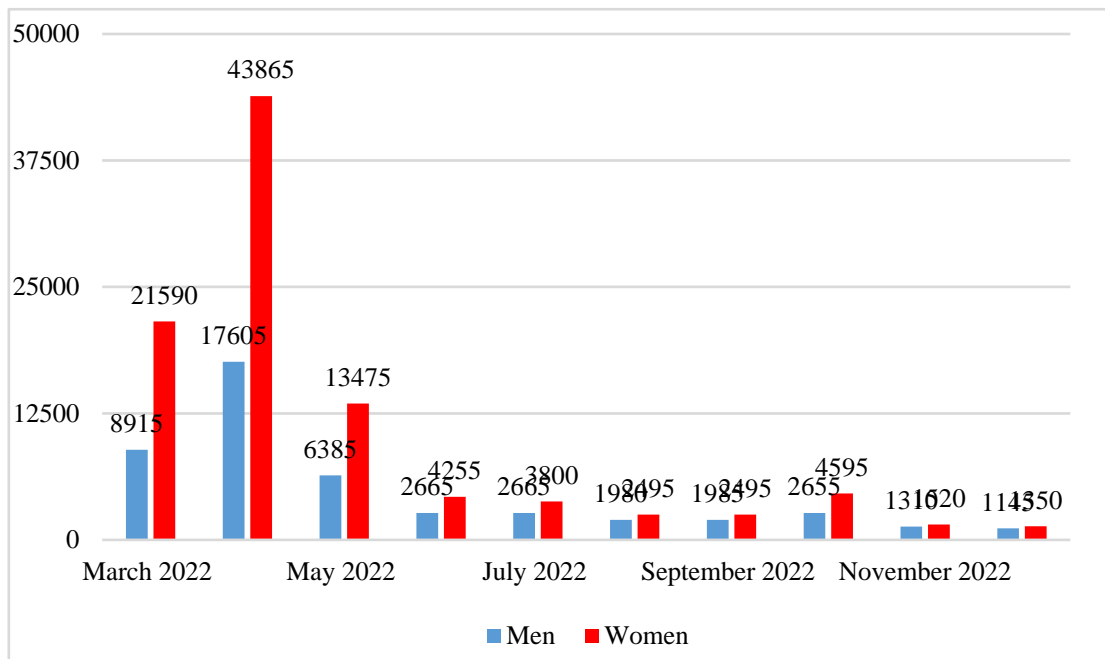However, this is not the case for those arriving from Ukraine, as can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Gender structure of Ukrainians registered for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period March-December 2022

Source: Eurostat

Unlike the rest of the people seeking protection, there are relatively more women among Ukrainians. This is because Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced the mobilization of a large number of men into the army, and consequently they were forced to stay on their country's territory to fight.

Another indicator that builds up a better description of the current situation regarding asylum seekers in the Republic of Bulgaria is the age structure of newcomers. Moreover, the presence of a large number of elderly people, whose working life is assumed to end soon, could cause an even greater negative response among locals, because the state will have to provide social care to them, which will harm the public needs of the local population itself. On the other hand, predominantly young arrivals are an opportunity to the country's labor market, which, respecting the current demographic situation in Bulgaria, characterized with aging population might be beneficial. Information in this direction is presented in Table 2 and Figure 5.

Table 2 presents the age structure of persons who sought asylum in Bulgaria on an annual basis between 2013 and 2023. An important clarification here is that the data excludes people coming from Ukraine, since, as it was already mentioned, they receive immediate temporary protection according to the decision of CoM. As it can be seen, the most numerous age group among Ukrainians is 18-34, followed by the group of children under 18. The comparatively larger number of young people can be explained by the fact of under maturity of the children, the early adulthood strives of young families to leave war time and better physical health to withstand any long journey and new settlement problems. Asylum seekers with minors from all countries might look similar but only in the Ukrainian case the 35-64 age group is so dominant. A detailed age structure of the arriving Ukrainians can be seen in Figure 5.

Table 2. Age distribution of first-time asylum seekers in Bulgaria between 2013-2023

| Year	Age						
	Less than 14	*14 - 17*	*Less than*	*18 - 34*	*35 - 64*	*Over*	*Indeterminate*
2013	1640	555	2195	3575	1165	40	0
2014	1895	1410	3305	6070	1390	40	0
2015	3265	2205	5470	12 440	2185	65	0
2016	3535	2995	6530	10 535	1835	90	0
2017	640	500	1140	1860	455	20	0
2018	315	510	830	1405	225	10	0
2019	175	535	710	1160	195	10	0
2020	290	815	1105	2100	250	0	0
2021	710	2985	3700	6395	780	15	0
2022	1810	3270	5085	12 755	2315	110	0
2023	1950	3725	5675	14 590	2095	30	0
Total:	**16 225**	**19 505**	**35 745**	**72 885**	**12 890**	**430**	**0**

Source: Eurostat
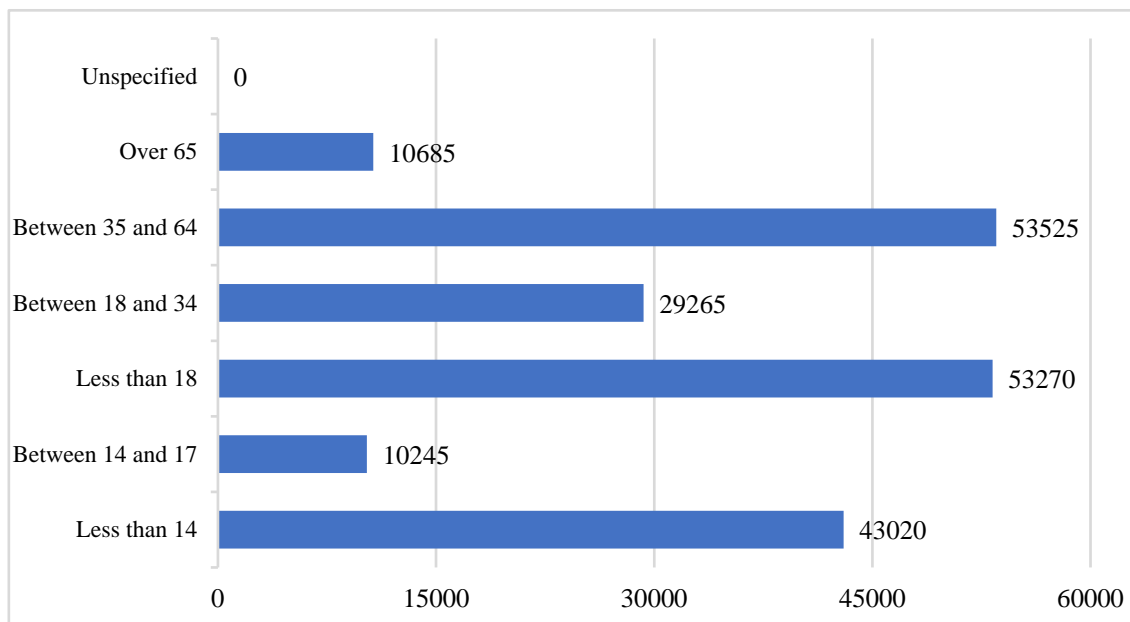
Figure 5. Age structure of persons registered for temporary protection from Ukraine in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period March-December 2022.

Source: Eurostat

To sum up the data from Table 2 and Figure 5, it can be said that the tendency for a predominant number of young newcomers is positive for Bulgaria, as they are much more susceptible to integration practices. In other words, the country's institutions, policy makers, and public opinion should be open to strategies, decisions, and policies for fulfilling successful integration to compensate the outcomes of the demographic crisis which in Bulgaria is most pronounced not only regionally, but also globally (World Population Review, 2024).

Given the fact that a significant number of newcomers are under the age of 18, it is worth examining those who have entered the country unaccompanied, and who are a particularly vulnerable group requiring special care. This is especially important in regard to the children from countries other than Ukraine. The number of unaccompanied children refugees from Ukraine is extremely low due to the fact that almost all the children are accompanied by an adult

relative or trusted adult – in 2023 there was no filled registration of an unaccompanied child. This situation even provoked the development of procedures for quick recognition of accompanying adults between Bulgaria and Ukraine. The situation for children coming from MENA countries is very different. There is a visible increase in the number of unaccompanied minors, reaching 3843 in 2023, which is the highest number of children seeking asylum since 1993 and the highest number of unaccompanied children ever – the applications for international protection submitted by children constitute 17% of all applications for the respective year (National Network for Children [NNC], 2024).
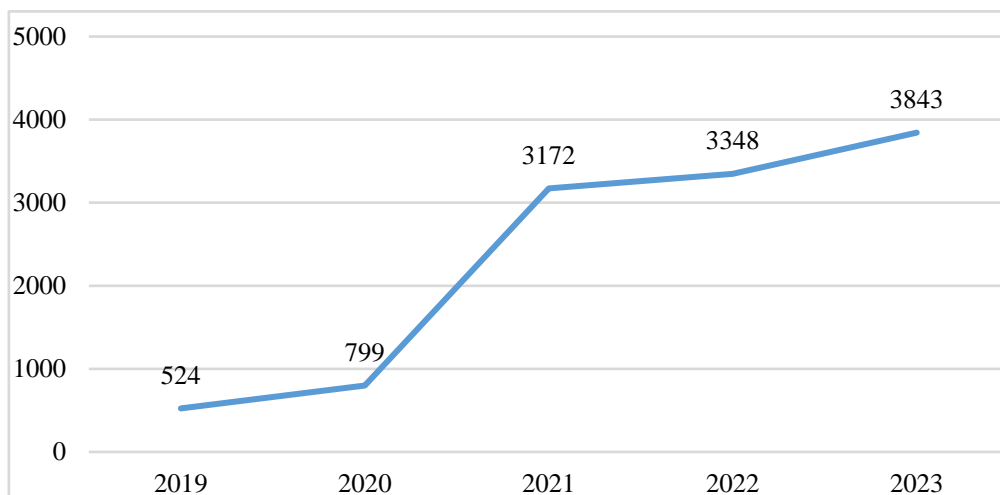
Figure 6. Number of unaccompanied minors registered in Bulgaria between 2019 and 2023

Source: SAR at the CoM

It is important to note that access to social and educational services for unaccompanied minors is highly restricted. With 3843 unaccompanied children in 2023, only 68 are enrolled in school, all under the age of 16. Even lower is the number of the children placed in social care – only 43 children (only two of them girls), or 1.8% of all the unaccompanied children in total. Generally, children are placed in resident care and not in foster family care. Only half of the children registered in the centers of the State Agency for Refugees have been registered at a doctor`s practice. Gaps in the legislative framework leaves the children with multiple vulnerabilities, incl. the fact that children with disabilities could not use social assistance (NNC, 2024). All this data clearly shows that Bulgaria fails in guaranteeing the safety, health and education of the unaccompanied children.

It is crucial to mention that Bulgaria, due to its geographic location as an external EU border, is comparatively unattractive and considered poor destination in terms of economic development and social conditions. Figure 6 points out the limitation of the opportunities for further development and comfortable stay in Bulgaria. It also explains why the country is predominantly used as a transit point to migration to Central and Western Europe (see Table 3).

The data in Table 3 also shows that the number of humanitarian statuses granted is bigger than the refugee statuses granted – 19 753 to 12 573 respectively. Another thing that stands out is the high number of discontinued proceedings. A probable reason for the significant difference between those who sought asylum and those who actually obtained some status in the country is the limitation of suitable conditions for residency. This includes services such as health care, education and training, access to the labor market, accommodation, and, last but not least, a welcoming local population that is likely to accept them. However, access to all of them remains limited, as stated in the latest report issued by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and cited by the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2023). The lack of sufficient capacity specifically for accommodation is also proven by data from the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria, which illustrate the number of places in the Registration and Reception Centers (RRCs) in the country, as well as the occupied places in them. This information is presented in Figure 7.

Table 3. Information on the persons who sought asylum and the decisions taken in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2013-2023.

Year	Type of decision				
	Refugee status granted	Granted humanitarian status	Rejection	Discontinued production	Total number of decisions
2013	183	2279	354	824	3640
2014	5162	1838	500	2853	10 353
2015	4708	889	623	14 567	20 787
2016	764	587	1732	8932	12 015
2017	804	900	3048	9662	14 414
2018	317	413	1362	860	2952
2019	181	300	1134	1041	2656
2020	105	716	1374	452	2647
2021	143	1876	1256	2870	6145
2022	100	4273	199	14 474	19 292
2023	106	5682	2950	16 211	24 949
Total:	**12 573**	**19 753**	**14 532**	**62 746**	

Source: SAR at the CoM
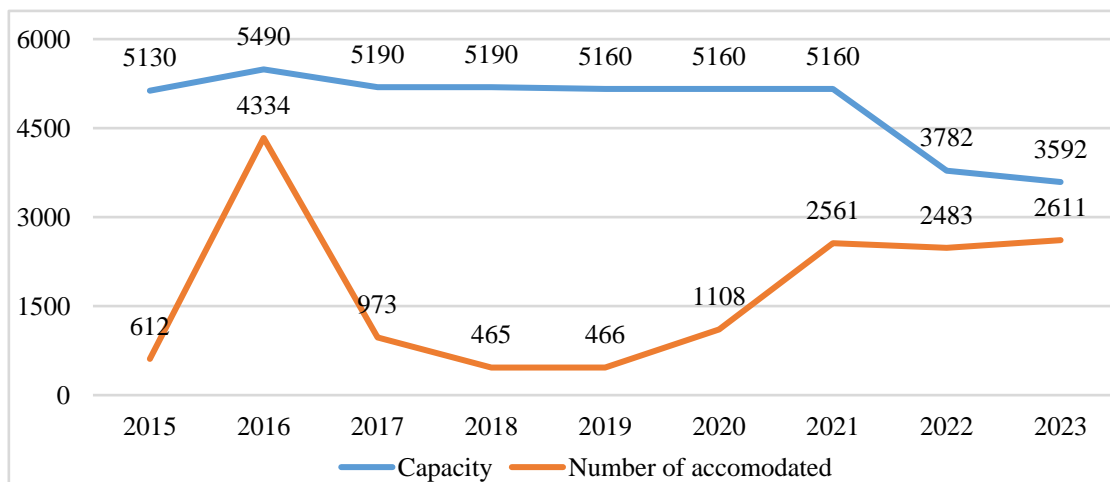
Figure 7. Capacity and number of people accommodated at the RRCs as of December of each calendar year between 2015 and 2023

Source: Ministry of Interior, Migration Statistics

It can be observed that the maximum capacity of RRCs in 2016 is 5490 places, however, in the following years their availability is decreasing continuously, and in 2023 it declined with 30%. Moreover, the report cited by ECRE is also dedicated to the conditions in accommodation facilities (ECRE, 2023), and gives a reasonable explanation stating the poor living conditions in the centers. Of course, a hypothesis should be added that a large part of the newcomers use the country predominantly as a transit point on their way to Central and Western European countries than as a final destination.

In reality, one should not forget that stay in RRCs is offered to asylum seekers arriving from countries other than Ukraine. Ukrainian citizens upon arrival (for the first few months of stay in the country) were accommodated in places that are part of the National Tourist Register - hotels, state recreation centers, a large part of which are on the Bulgarian seacoast and seen as holiday places. This regulation prioritizing the Ukrainian arrivals gave rise to negative reactions not so much from the other asylum communities as from the local population.

5. Survey Results Analysis and Discussion

So far, the current situation related to the asylum seekers in Bulgaria has been examined with its peaks in the number of applicants, their gender, age structure and nationality. Furthermore, the number of those with granted protection who have decided to stay longer was outlined, pointing out some of the main institutional barriers for accessing their rights as well as the factors hindering the refugee's inclusion and integration. In this part, a special attention will be given to the local population's attitudes towards newcomers.

As it was already noted in the methodology part, the survey covers both – attitudes in the social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Forums), where people could easily share their opinion, but also the news in the mainstream media, where a content is just shared with the mass audience. For further clarification of the information examined see Figure 8.
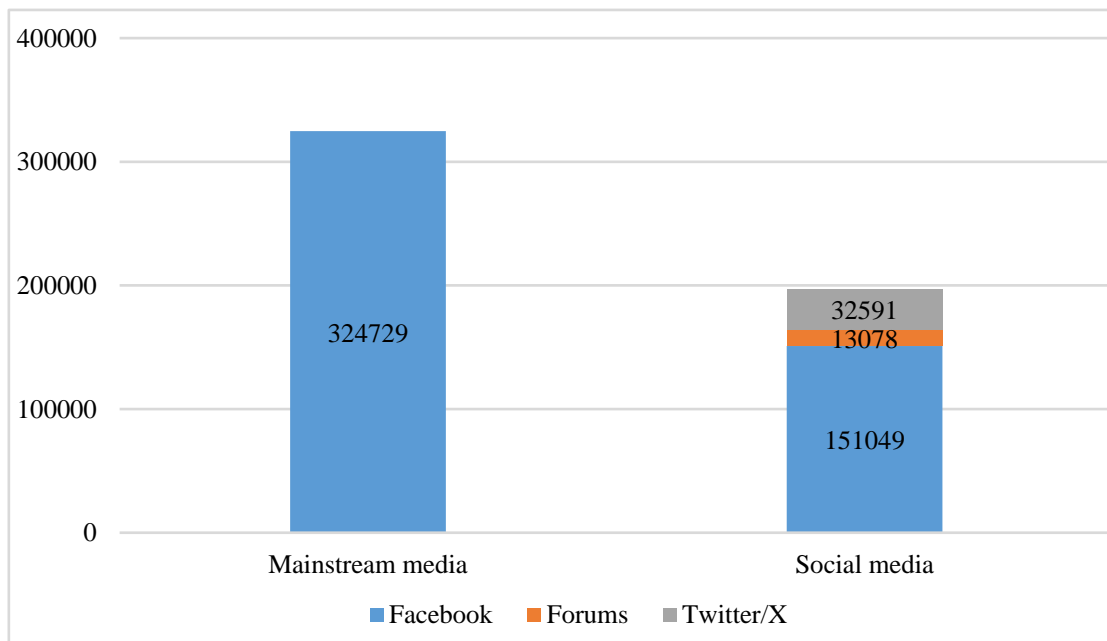
Figure 8. Number of mentions of the topic on different channels

As presented in Figure 8, a total number of 521 447 publications, news, posts, comments, etc. are included in the research. In regard to the mainstream media, they are mainly news related to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. Their share, compared to the social media content, is larger, i.e. over 60% of all publications examined. As for the social media platforms, Facebook is the platform that attracts most mentions of the topic with 151 049 intercepted mentions between January 2022 and April 2024.

With regard to the nationalities of newcomers, the most frequently mentioned in publications and comments are the Ukrainians (see Figure 9).
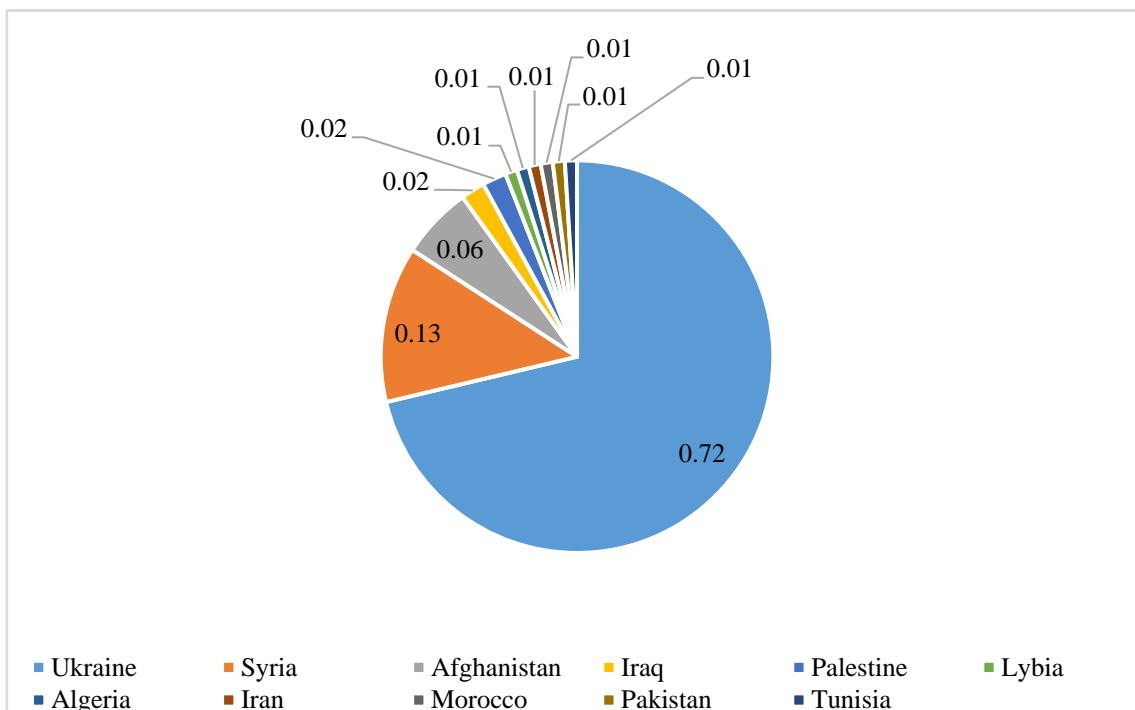
Figure 9. Share of mentions of different nationalities in the social media

Given the fact that the researched period covers the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War, it is not surprising to see that mentions of Ukrainian refugees consist over 70% of all references. Data shows that 13% of the mentions concern Syrians and 6% - Afghans. The high public interest towards those three nationalities is anticipated. Considering the number of persons seeking asylum in Bulgaria based on nationalities between 2013 and 2023 (Figure 1) it might be seen that the Syrians and Afghans represent most of the newcomers for this period. More than a year later – as of the end of September 2024 data shows that nearly 200 000 Ukrainians have applied for temporary protection in the country (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2024). Apart from the numerical explanation other factors like ethnic similarities and cultural affinity should be considered, which have pushed aside the image of the stereotypical asylum seeker as a representative from MENA countries to that of the "neighbor". Indeed, a warmer welcome and deeper compassion to that particular group can be expected.

5.1 Attitudes Across Different News and Social Media Platforms

The review of the commitment of the two main types of media – traditional media channels and social media (Facebook, Twitter/X and internet forums) with the issue of the Ukrainians shows that there are two peak rates of publications - one at the beginning of 2022, immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and one a year later. Additionally, while the traditional news started to cover the refugee crisis earlier than the social media, the latter reached a higher volume of publications during the spring of 2023 (see Figure 10). Later on, at the beginning of 2024 the traditional news channels began to cover the topic again, while the social media channels practically didn't show interest in their coverage.
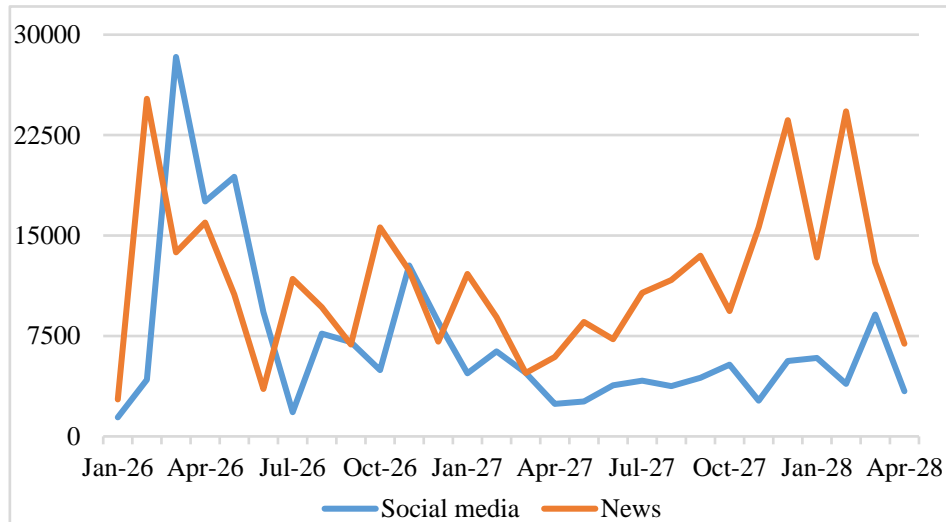
Figure 10. Dynamics of the media coverage on refugees in social and traditional media

As to the content, the social media platforms host predominantly more open negative or somewhat negative attitudes while the mainstream media uses more neutral style coverage of events, related to refugees and/or seeking asylum (see Figure 11).
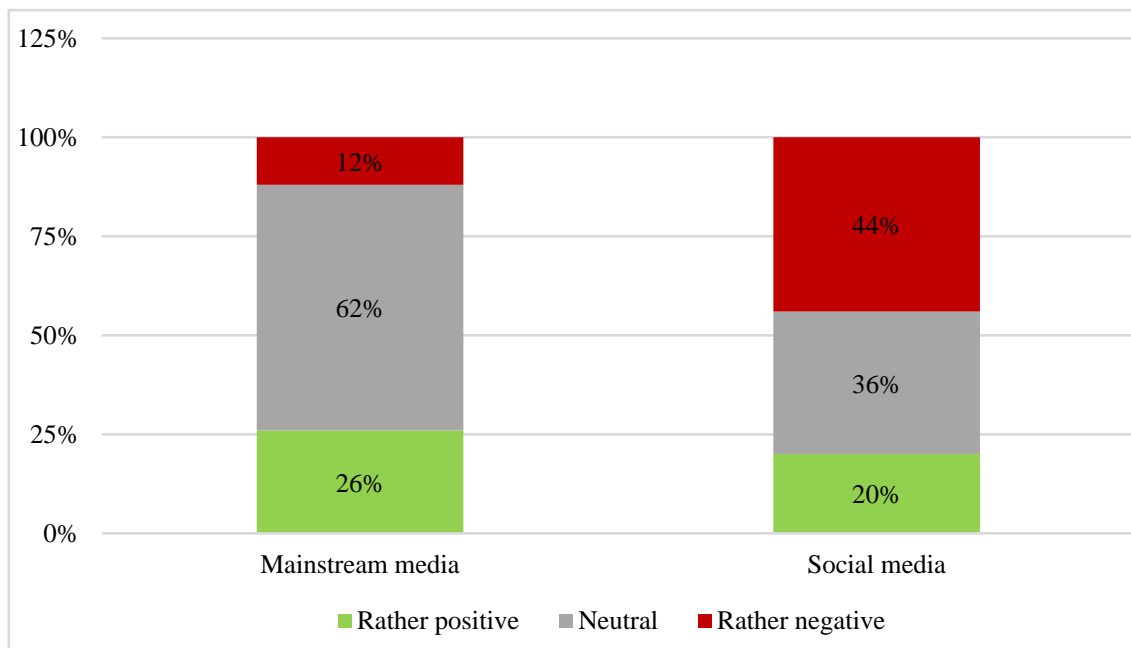

Figure 11. Attitudes across different channels

The publications concerning the refugees from Ukraine on the mainstream media are characterized by more positive attitude and/or neutrality, because the news platform and channels usually cover more data, provide political, economic and public arguments and rather seldom - human stories or emotional narratives. These includes international treaties, signed by Bulgaria and other human rights obligations to host refugees. The mainstream media has more consistent interest in the coverage of news related to refugees and asylum seekers than social media but that doesn't concern the publications about refugees from MENA countries, which are sporadic and mostly related to some curious or offensive facts.

The picture of the social media channels looks somehow different. At first sight there is an unprecedented increase of publications in March – May 2022, particularly on Facebook (see Figure 12). Facebook in Bulgaria is very popular and has the highest number of users. Thus, its influence on people`s attitudes is much more substantial compared to other social media channels.
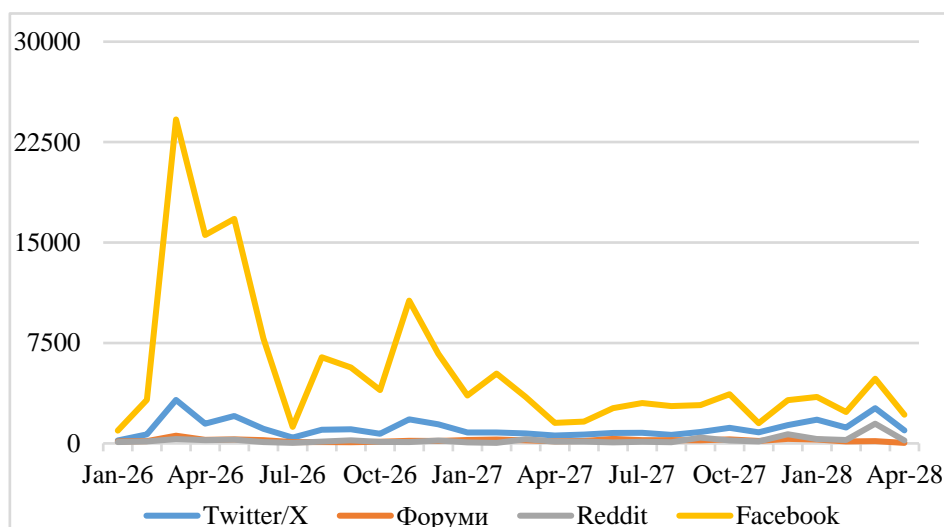
Figure 12. Dynamics of publications on different social media channels

The data on Figure 13 clearly shows that more than half of the posts on Facebook are with negative connotation (see Figure 13).
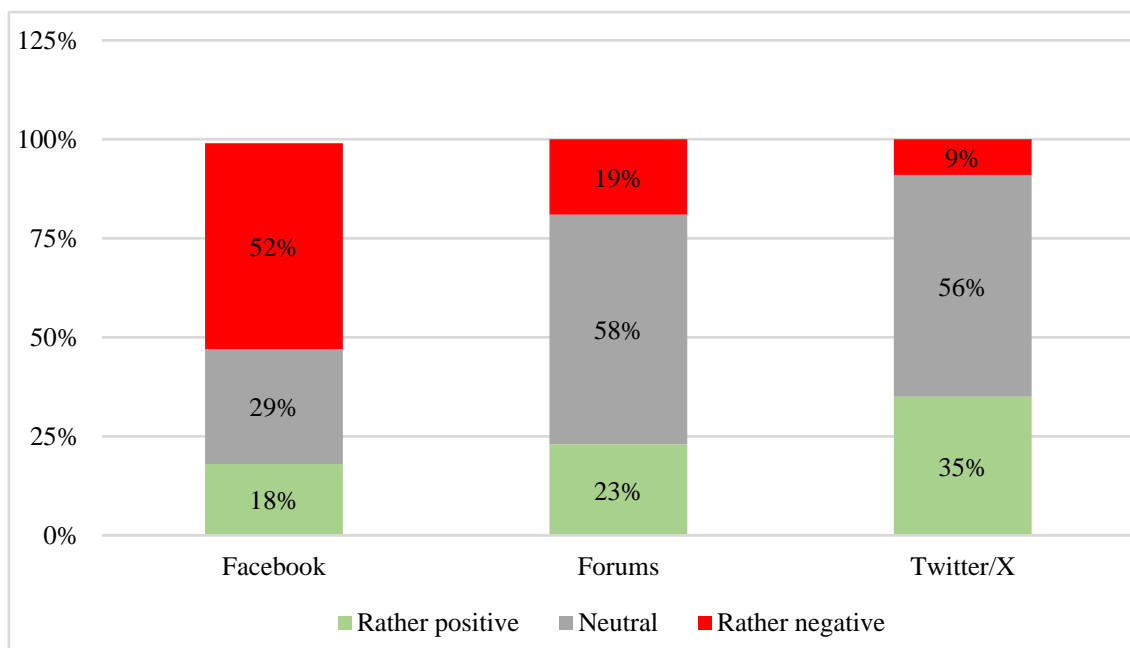

Figure 13. Attitudes across different social media platforms

The only period when the positive attitudes seem to be more are related to the first days after the start of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine, during which the publications were related to compassion, help and organization of voluntary actions. At the time of announcing the state`s support measures for the Ukrainian refugees, the conversation on Facebook dramatically changes and the negative publications prevail. Lexical analysis shows that the main narrative of the negative publications is related to the compensation of 40 BGN/day for accommodation and meals that was given by the State to the hotels participating in the program for accommodation of the refugees from February to September 2022. The texts compare the above stated measure with the per diem allowances of representatives of Bulgarian social groups living in economic challenges (i.e. pensioners or those affected by natural disasters), evoking sympathy to the locals and discontent to the newcomers.

Another discussion which generates discontent is the proposed possibility for admission of Ukrainian children in state kindergartens in the larger cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna etc. The social situation with public nurseries and kindergarten causes hot public debate annually, since the admission places are in short supply and the whole process of

finding a place, or overcoming certain address registration restrictions, is by no means very frustrating for young families.

These examples confirm the conclusion, stated by another study, that "when faced with competition…, native individuals, act as rational actors pursuing their own well-being…tend to adopt negative attitudes in order to justify their social positions" (Kaim et al., 2024).

Overall, the negative connotations are related mostly to protection of the equality principle and strive against double standards, without taking into account the need for emergency assistance and care of the newcomers. The largest wave of posts on social media in the beginning of 2022 related to the first wave of refugees from Ukraine shows that the most common fear commented on Facebook is perception of an unequal treatment - receiving privileges at the expense of the Bulgarians (Figure 14). The expectation to trace fears of losing a job to newcomers or of facing fundamental threats to the cultural identity and values are not directly stated. As stated earlier, a large group of newcomers had been accommodated in hotel facilities on the Black Seaside, where seasonal work is most wanted. The other topics, which evoke negative responses, are the risk of raising the rate of delinquent deeds and behavior, often using the refugee status as an excuse.
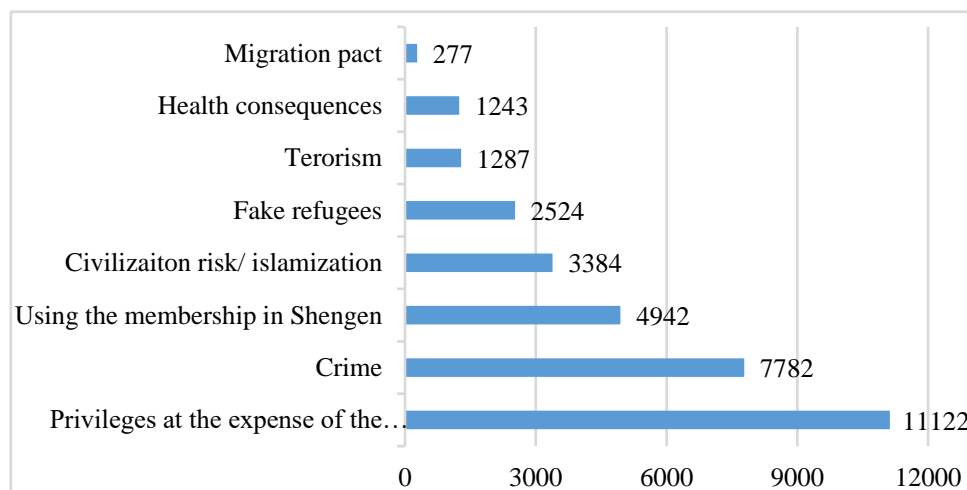

Figure 14. Topics of the negative publications

Thus, it can be concluded that within the reviewed period there is a clearly visible large wave of negative publications related to refugees and asylum seekers on Facebook. Bearing in mind its popularity and the frequency of usage, it is important to stress its potential influence on the refugees' public image and on people`s attitudes – especially for the Bulgarians who lack direct experience with incomers. Moreover, as social media channels are not perceived only as media, but also as a reflection of the communities and society`s overall opinion, they in fact could be seen as provoking and galvanizing certain negative trends. Facebook algorithm furthermore creates the so called "eco-chambers", i.e. communities united around the rejection of "newcomers". Thus, the observed wave of negative publications should not be reviewed only in quantitative meaning, but also in the light of the creation of groups of like-minded people.

5.2 On the Sentiment of the Publications (on the Frame of Mood)

The analysis of publication or comments on social media channels often includes a description of the attitude's valence - positive or negative, which could be traced not only by the content of the particular narrative but also by the type of keywords used. For example, the label "refugee" evokes more positive connotations with special accent on compassion and empathy, since these are people fleeing conflict or prosecution. The label "migrant" provokes uncertainty and generally – more negative reaction, since it is understood as a personal or family choice to move for improving life conditions with the possibility to return home. Rarely, in social media one might find the label - "forced migrant", which would transform the meaning of the two labels to become easy interchangeable. In the case of the current study, the label "refugee" is used mostly referring to the Ukrainians, while the people from third countries are more often presented as "migrants". There is also a shift in the frequency of using the different keywords in social media. At the beginning of 2022, the newcomers from Ukraine are mainly referred to as "refugees", subsequently they become "migrants" (see Figure 15).
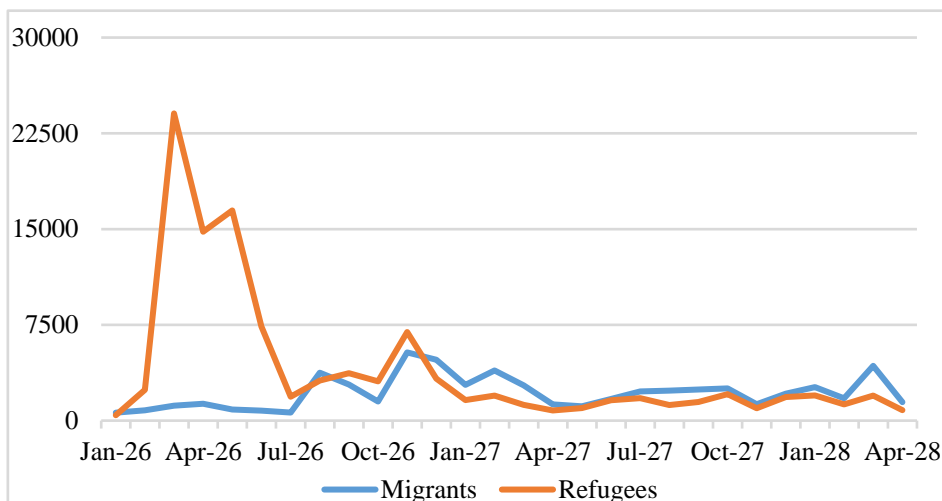
Figure 15. Frequency of use of the label's "refugees" and "migrants"

A key factor for the sentiment of the publications is the country of origin of the refugees. The positive publications about Ukrainians are almost twice as many than the positive publications concerning refugees from MENA countries. However, the negative publications are comparable between the two groups (see Figure 16).
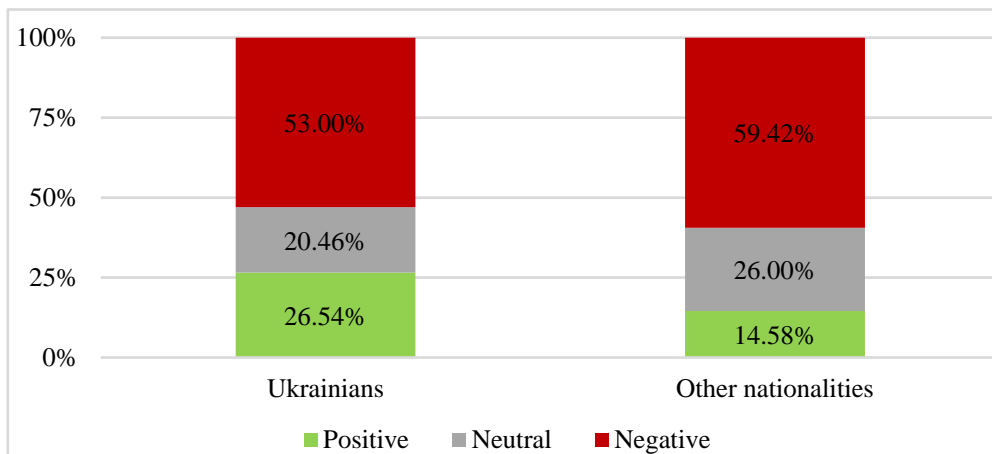

Figure 16. Attitudes towards asylum seekers of different nationalities on social media channels

There is also a difference in the attitudes towards the refugees depending on their gender and age. The men are mentioned more often – 25% more than children and almost twice as women. While the attitudes towards women and children are more positive, still 37% of the publications concerning children and almost half of the publications concerning women (48%) are negative (Figure 16). Also, it is important to mention that teenage children, and especially boys, are rarely recognized as children.
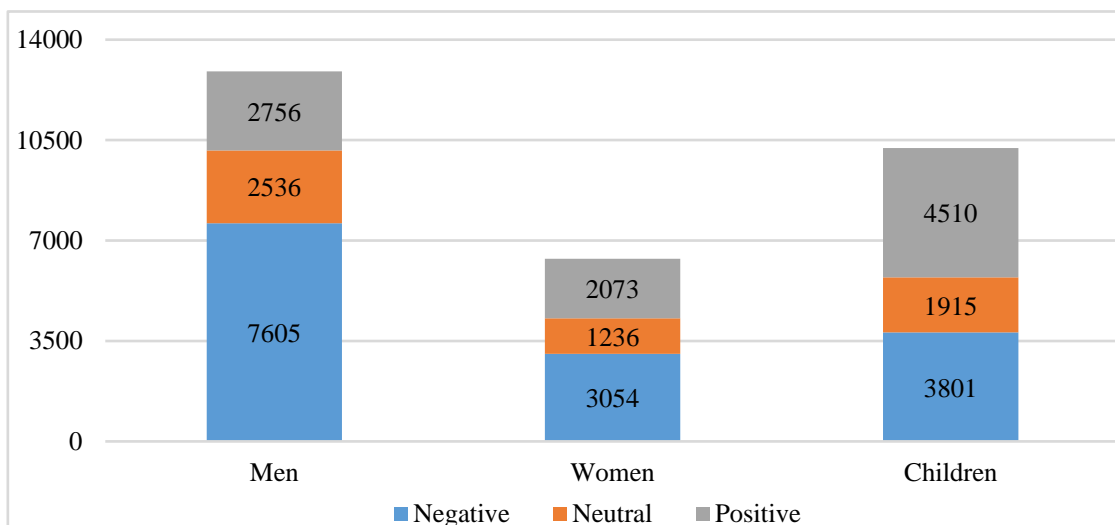
Figure 17. Attitudes by gender and age of the refugees

It is of interest to look at the source of the publications dealing with the topic of refugee. The social media channels in general and Facebook in particular are very widely used by politicians from the far right, who are presenting public positions against hosting refugees. Additionally, a brief look at the Facebook page of Border Police General Directorate shows frequent publications about cases of prevention of illegal migrants, but not a single publication is devoted to people seeking asylum.

The negative publications on social media often provoke the foundation of negative stereotypes or affirm existing ones. The narrative that is used is similar to that of the fake news composition - shocking examples, patriotic argumentation, unilateral discourse. An example can be found in the frequent use of the narrative "migrants" coupling with the terms "illegal" and "crime". A quarter of the publications about the refugees from MENA countries are made in the context of some crime (see Figure 18), while this share for the Ukrainians is only 10%. The impression is that there are two types of negative images that are created – the image of the young men coming illegally from MENA countries and conducting crimes, who have presented themselves as refugees but in fact are trying to "invade" Europe (incl. Bulgaria); and the image of the rich Ukrainians, who have come for recreation and holiday, using Bulgarian and European taxpayers' resources.
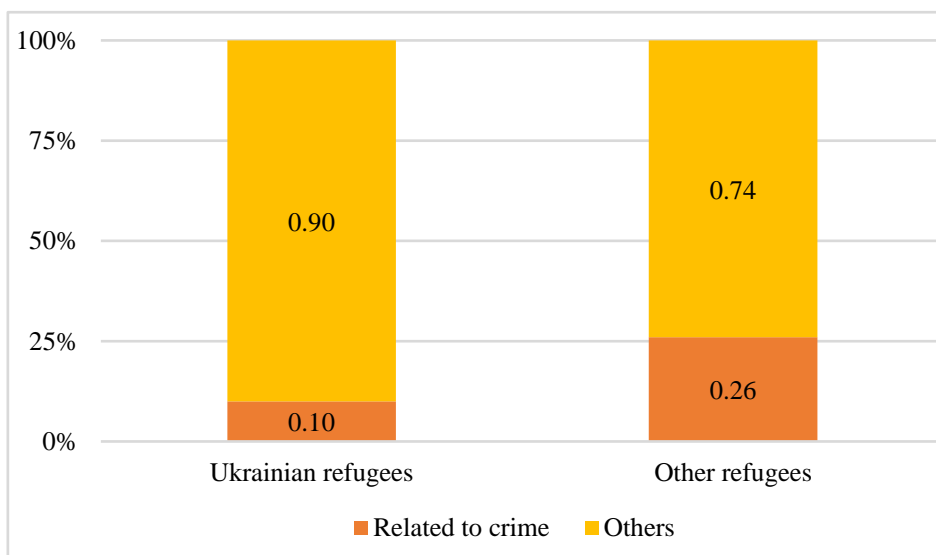

Figure 18. Share of publications related to crime

6. Conclusion

The topic related to refugees has gained particular popularity in the years after 2013 due to the rise of the people seeking asylum in the EU, provoked by the unstable international security environment. However, Bulgaria is not

among the countries, considered to be huge acceptors. Still, the statistical data showed that there were two clearly distinct peaks in the number of applicants for protection in Bulgaria - the first in the years between 2014 and 2016 and the second in the years after 2021.

In this regard, this paper provides data on the number of the newcomers, their gender, age, and nationality structure. The comparison revealed striking difference between those coming from Ukraine and the other refugee groups from other countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, being the most common. While the first group is comprised mainly of middle-aged women, seniors and minors, the latter - are mostly young men. The information on the statuses awarded suggested that a large proportion of migrants probably pass through the country in transit, trying to reach certain countries in Western Europe, where socio-economic conditions are comparatively better.

The paper presented further information on the country's capacity for accommodation. The data, on the one hand, showed that the country does not have enough places to accommodate those who are unable to provide housing for themselves. On the other hand, despite the significant difference between the available places and the number of new arrivals, the facilities remain unfilled, generally due to negligence and disrepair.

Aware of the fact that the success of the inclusion and integration processes depends crucially on the public images, news and the information shared by the mainstream media channels, as well as discussions on social media concerning the topic of refugee and asylum seekers were analyzed. For the larger part of the people in Bulgaria these are the main sources of information, while direct contact with the refugees is rare. In this regard, the wave of negative publications, which was found in social media channels about refugees from MENA countries and Ukraine expose the seriousness of the problems in the reception, hospitality and attitudes of Bulgarians towards newcomers.

This article claims that the institutional measures towards people seeking protection should not be short-sighted; that the public speech of politicians and influencers should be emphatic; that there should be enough potential for direct living experience with the refugees' groups. However, the wide divergences of profiles of today's refugees, their differences in age, gender, education and cultural values, is generating almost everywhere a type of defense strategy, which expresses itself in hostile reactions. Securing its own interests, host country population pushes the formation of simple binomial stereotypes, predominantly negative, which in turn form the cognitive, emotional and behavioral base of the attitude for rejecting any incomers. In general, the social media narrative for the displaced people from MENA countries systematically creates the image of the "migrant" – the young man hiding under the refugee status, who is "invading" Bulgaria with possible crime intentions. As for the Ukrainian refugees, the "invasion" is seen as taking valuable resources – as aid, opportunities, services from the Bulgarians.

The current study showed that the nation of origin of the refugees do matter as regard to the volume of negative messages, but this do not influence profoundly the overall level of disapproval.

This paper restricts its interest to describe the phenomenon of the large wave of negative publications and comments on Facebook concerning the refugees in Bulgaria. It does not provide answers to the expectations of their subsidence or to the conditions, which might provoke new types of negation. This should be a task and a subject of interest of further work.

In reality, the contemporary political situation with ongoing conflicts in the world might force new migration waves, i.e. a continued influx of migrants in any country, incl. Bulgaria. Ignoring today's problems, not looking for adequate strategies to overcome the formation of negative attitudes will worsen and further complicate the processes of inclusion, integration, and building relevant capacities for refugee protection.

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Authors contributed equally to the study.

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