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The Welfare of Refugee Children in Bulgarian Society in the Context of State Policies and Public Attitudes

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Abstract

In recent years, the escalation of international and internal conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and Bulgaria's geographical location, which places it on the route of those seeking protection from these regions in Europe, has led to a significant increase in the number of refugee children arriving in Bulgaria. According to Eurostat data, Bulgaria ranks fourth in terms of the number of unaccompanied refugee children in the European Union. In this article, the possibilities for achieving the welfare of refugee children and their successful integration into society are considered as a result of the intersection of two main trends—state legislation and public policies aimed at guaranteeing the best interests of refugee children, and public opinion about refugee children, which, in some cases, cause the failure of positive state measures and policies. The data on public attitudes towards refugee children used here are the result of an empirical study conducted in 2021 by the authors of this article. The results show that while state legislation and public policies are evolving towards ensuring the best interests of the child, the same cannot be said for public attitudes and the distance that the local population demonstrates towards refugee children.

Keywords: refugee children; unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; welfare of refugee children; public policies; public attitudes

1. Introduction

In recent years, the escalation of international and internal conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and Bulgaria's geographical location, which places it on the route of those seeking protection from these regions in Europe, has led to a significant increase in the number of refugee children arriving in Bulgaria, and especially unaccompanied refugee children. The importance of the challenge facing our country in relation to the successful integration and welfare of refugee children in Bulgarian society is clearly demonstrated by the fact that, according to the latest Eurostat data, Bulgaria ranks fourth in terms of the number of unaccompanied refugee children in the European Union [1]. According to the annual report of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) at the Council of Ministers (CM) for 2024, 2601 unaccompanied minor persons sought protection in Bulgaria [2].

Over the years, there have been significant variations in the group of minors under the age of 18 who have sought international protection in Bulgaria. According to data from the State Agency for Refugees [3], in 2012, they accounted for only 4.72% of all persons seeking international protection in Bulgaria, but their share began to grow rapidly, reaching

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15.5% in 2016 and 31.9% in 2020 of those seeking international protection in Bulgaria. In general, over the last few years, refugee children under the age of 18 have accounted for approximately one-third of those seeking protection in Bulgaria. For example, for the last year (2025), data from the SAR show that children under the age of 18 account for 27.3% of the total number of people seeking international protection in Bulgaria [3]. And the applications for protection from unaccompanied minors and persons under the age of 18 received between 1 January 2025 and 31 December 2025 account for 70.8% of all applications submitted by persons under the age of 18 applying for international protection in our country. As can be seen from the data presented, more than two-thirds of persons under the age of 18 applying for international protection in Bulgaria are unaccompanied minors (70.8% for 2025), which poses major challenges for the Bulgarian state in terms of ensuring adequate conditions for their well-being and integration in our country. When analyzing the dynamics of migration processes, it should always be taken into account that there are over 3.5 million refugees in the Republic of Turkey, our southern neighbor. In addition, Turkey has a visa-free regime with more than 60 countries in the world, which means that refugees located in Turkey could cross our border and fall into the hands of traffickers on their way to Central and Western Europe. As part of the refugee flows, it is precisely minors and underage children who are most at risk of numerous offenses during their journey, such as violence, abuse, and exploitation. The most vulnerable in this regard are unaccompanied and family-separated young children and minors. They arrive in the country without a parent or legal representative, often in a difficult emotional and physical state, having experienced conflict, loss, and risks along the migration route—many of them have experienced violence, sexual exploitation, rape, trafficking, forced marriage, or severe emotional or psychological pressure. Their age, psychological instability, unfamiliar surroundings, and sometimes traumatic experiences place them at serious risk of social isolation, violence, exploitation, and trafficking. The challenge of starting their lives over in a new country without knowing the language and culture, as well as the loss of loved ones, relatives, and friends, places unaccompanied refugee children in a position of extreme vulnerability.

In this article, the possibilities for achieving the well-being of refugee children and their successful integration into society are considered as a result of the intersection of two main trends: state legislation and public policies aimed at guaranteeing the best interests of refugee children, on the one hand, and public opinion and the attitudes and distancing demonstrated by the local population towards refugee children, on the other, which, in some cases, cause the failure of positive state measures and policies.

In Bulgaria, there is a lack of research focused on public opinion and attitudes towards refugee children. We can mention the project "Integrating Refugee and Asylum-seeking Children in the Educational Systems of EU Member States: Evaluation and Promotion of Current Best Practices" 2010–2012—INTEGRACE [4], implemented before the actual start of the refugee wave by the Center for the Study of Democracy in Bulgaria (CSD), which, however, focused only on the educational integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children and the identification of good practices in this area. Similar studies are also being conducted in Canada [5], Italy [6], Austria [7], Slovenia [8], Estonia [9], Greece [10], Poland [11], the United Kingdom [12], and other countries. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria (UNHCR) periodically studies the needs of those seeking and receiving international protection in our country by age, gender, and social group [13]. The most recent study was conducted in 2020 and only partially concerned refugee children, insofar as it examined the needs of different age groups of refugees.

In connection with the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum adopted in May 2024, Bulgaria adopted a National Plan for the Implementation of the EU Pact in December 2024.

On this occasion, in 2025, the Center for Legal Aid—Voice in Bulgaria Foundation launched the project "Support for Children on the Move" [14], implemented within the framework of the INSPIRE project "Improving national support for prevention, intervention, and response to violence against children, and empowering victims" [15], co-funded by the EU, which, however, is mainly focused on the legal assessment of the impact of the Pact on the rights of migrant children.

In other words, there is an almost complete lack of research on public attitudes specifically towards refugee children in Bulgarian society. In this regard, this article will present data from a nationally representative survey conducted in 2021 by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on Bulgarian citizens' perceptions of refugees, including refugee children, in which the authors of the article played a key role. The perceptions of Bulgarian citizens about refugee children and their attitudes towards them will be analyzed as a prerequisite for the success of state policies aimed at integrating refugee children into Bulgarian society and ensuring that their interests and well-being are respected. This is because the integration and well-being of children seeking international protection in Bulgaria is the point where targeted state policies and legislative measures in this area intersect with the attitudes of the local population, and public attitudes, in many cases, determine the possibility of successful implementation of state policies.

In this regard, the main research objectives of this article are:

- To outline the legal framework and current national policies regarding refugee children seeking asylum in Bulgaria, and to demonstrate the extent to which these policies are aimed at integrating refugee children into Bulgarian society;
- To identify prevailing public opinion in Bulgaria regarding refugee children, and to outline the distancing attitudes demonstrated toward them;
- To demonstrate the extent to which public policies and public opinion are consistent, i.e., to what extent prevailing public opinion is in line with current national policies, and to what extent it supports them.

The hypothesis is that the more positive public opinion is toward refugee children, the greater the chance of successfully implementing government policies and the greater the possibility of achieving the successful integration and well-being of refugee children in Bulgarian society, whereas negative public attitudes and public opinion represent a barrier to the implementation of government policies and hinder the integration of refugee children into society.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The well-being and integration of refugee children into Bulgarian society are examined through the lens and within the theoretical framework of migration concepts, taking into account the significant difference between refugees and migrants. A refugee is a person who, due to a well-founded fear of persecution (based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion), is outside their country of origin and cannot avail themselves of its protection. Migrants, on the other hand, are people who move primarily voluntarily, often in search of a better life, work, or education, without facing a direct threat to their lives, but rather are driven by economic reasons. For this reason, the integration of refugees and migrants into host societies is the subject of various government policies. Initially, Europe viewed refugees as a valuable economic investment and a source of cheap labor and human capital, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced an "open-door" policy toward refugees at the end of 2014 [16]. The events on New Year's Eve 2016 in Cologne (the case of the women attacked at the Cologne train station) and the city's mayor, Henriette Reker's,

call to keep "an arm's length" from refugees radically shifted attitudes toward refugees not only in Germany but throughout Europe.

A key focus of research and theoretical concepts regarding refugees is the factors influencing migration processes, which some authors classify as "push" and "pull" factors, while others refer to them as "sending factors" and "receiving factors" [17–21]. In this regard, some theoretical concepts emphasize globalization processes as a source of migration [22–24], while others focus on the economic benefits of migration [25,26] and the interest of specific countries in attracting certain categories of immigrants from the perspective of the benefits to their national economies. A frequent topic of academic debate is the benefits and costs that refugees bring to host countries, which some authors define as the "liberal paradox" [27]. It is expressed in the fact that, in order to maintain their competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world and meet the needs of the labor market, Western European economies are forced to open their doors to newcomers. However, at the same time, for reasons related to public security, the domestic political situation, cultural diversity, and the demographic and ethnic structure of Western societies, they are compelled to implement increasingly strict controls and stricter rules governing immigrants' access to their countries [28–33].

In this context, it is also the definition of the attitude toward refugees and migrants through the lens of cultural diversity. Mass migration, characteristic of the global era, leads to a very significant change concerning the way of life in a multicultural environment, and is related to the fact that coexistence in close proximity with "others" and those "different" from us is increasingly turning into coexistence with "foreigners." Zygmunt Bauman discusses the new figure of the "foreign neighbor", which has become a reality as a result of globalization and the new forms of multicultural coexistence it engenders, in "Postmodern Ethics" [34]. Consequently, in this new situation, the question arises of how to coexist with those who are different from us when they are not only "other" but also "foreign"—that is, how to live with difference when it is tangibly present in our everyday world but present as "foreign." In this new situation, the encounter between different cultures and values increasingly gives rise to tension, fear, and rejection. To paraphrase Z. Bauman, the explanation for this new situation is that, for the people behind "Europe's gates," refugees have always been and continue to be "outsiders." And the ideas for a positive solution lie within the framework of contact theories, insofar as positive contact and getting to know "the other" and "the different" are prerequisites for fostering a positive attitude toward them.

The influence of public opinion regarding migrants and refugees on both general European policy and national migration policies and strategies has been the subject of analysis in a series of international studies [35–37]. Studies on public representations and attitudes toward migrants and refugees focus primarily on issues related to employment and the competition they pose to local workers, the impact of temporary and irregular migration on wages [38], the threat of job loss for local workers [39], and the perception of immigration as a burden on the social systems of migrant-receiving countries [40–42]. In addition to perceptions of the economic threat that migrants and refugees pose to local communities, some studies also focus on public perceptions of the threat this group of people poses to national identity, Western values [30], and culture [43–45], as well as the demographic and ethnic composition and social structure of host societies [33]. Some authors structure attitudes toward asylum seekers as being shaped by three main factors: economic considerations, humanitarian concerns, and anti-Muslim attitudes [46]. In this context, studies of migration, including refugee flows, are viewed as a form of cross-cultural mobility that transcends boundaries between cultures, values, religions, and social norms [47,48].

A specific focus of research on public opinion regarding refugees is the definition of attitudes toward them through the lens of the so-called "societal mirror" [17], which encompasses, on the one hand, the host society's perceptions of migrants and refugees and, on the other hand, the perceptions of the refugees and migrants themselves regarding how they are perceived by the local population—that is, the way in which they see themselves reflected in the dominant public perceptions of them. In this regard, a number of authors highlight the differences observed in host societies' attitudes toward refugees, immigrants, and immigration in general [49], with some of them [50] comparing attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, concluding that the similarities in attitudes toward the two types of migrants outweigh the differences, while others examine attitudes toward "foreigners" in general [51–53] and argue that there is no difference in attitudes toward refugees and immigrants. According to other researchers, however [54], there are differences in attitudes toward refugees and immigrants, and these differences show various patterns and have different determinants. The study by the two authors is based on data from 16 countries. One of the key conclusions they reach is that the two groups of foreigners—refugees and immigrants —are indeed perceived as different from the local population, with differences stemming from the fact that attitudes toward refugees are more often linked to the macro level, while immigrants are more often associated with economic issues at the micro level. Some researchers also analyze the ways in which public attitudes influence refugees' prospects in their new society [55,56] and seek to identify the link between the establishment of a supportive or hostile environment and refugees' adaptation and mental health [49]. In contrast, others [46,57] emphasize the qualities possessed by asylum seekers and the significance this has for how they are perceived by local residents.

A significant part of the scientific research also focuses on comparing integration policies and citizenship acquisition policies across different countries [29,30,58–61] and on the influence of European institutions on national migration and refugee policies [21,62–68]. On the other hand, there are analyses of the differences in policies and approaches to the issue of migration and refugees across various European countries [33].

Special attention is given in international research to refugee children and the impact that life as a refugee has on their lives and future prospects [69–72]. The integration of refugee children into host societies is often viewed through the lens of well-being. The child welfare frameworks emphasize a multidimensional understanding, viewing well-being as a complex of physical, psychological, social, emotional, and educational development [73]. According to this perspective, a child needs a safe and healthy environment, achievement in school, family and peer support, and emotional stability. Special attention is given to the social environment, including institutional support, healthcare services, and equal access to education, which are fundamental prerequisites for a child's well-being [74]. In this sense, well-being represents a stable combination of external conditions and personal capacities, integrating social, economic, and psychological components [75]. This means that a child's well-being requires stability in their environment in order to create conditions for personal development, psychological resilience, and full integration. When applied to refugee children, child welfare frameworks imply balanced interventions, including social services, inclusive conditions, psychosocial support, and educational programs that help overcome social isolation and address the risk of trauma.

This brief overview of the research on migration, refugees, and public attitudes toward them is important because it allows us to demonstrate, through the results of our own study—which we will present below—that the formation of public opinion regarding refugees in Bulgarian society follows the same pattern as at the international level, reflecting similarities of the key issues that migration poses to different societies.

3. Legal Framework and National Policies

According to Article 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [76], ratified by Bulgaria in 1991, the care of refugee children must be analogous to the care of Bulgarian citizens' children, with refugee children receiving initial care in Bulgaria in accordance with the Asylum and Refugees Act (ARA). This Act regulates special requirements for unaccompanied minor refugee children. According to the Asylum and Refugees Act, Article 25 (1), "an unaccompanied minor or underage foreigner seeking or received protection who is on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria shall be assigned a legal guardian or custodian under the terms and conditions of the Child Protection Act and the Family Code" [77]. Unaccompanied minors seeking, or those who have received protection, are entitled to health insurance, accessible medical care, and free use of medical services under the same conditions and procedures as Bulgarian citizens. Their rights are guaranteed in Article 40, paragraph three, item seven of the Health Insurance Act and are provided for at the expense of the republican budget. They are also entitled to education in state and municipal schools in the Republic of Bulgaria in accordance with the procedure established by the Chair of the State Agency for Refugees and the Minister of Education and Science. School-age persons seeking international protection are provided with free education in state and municipal schools in the Republic of Bulgaria under the same conditions and in the same procedures as Bulgarian citizens. For pupils seeking international protection who are admitted to state or municipal schools in the Republic of Bulgaria, additional modules for learning Bulgarian are provided. The access and active inclusion of minors seeking international protection in various forms and levels of education is a prerequisite for ensuring their well-being and successful adaptation and integration in the Republic of Bulgaria. Furthermore, they are not subject to expedited procedures under Article 71 of the Asylum and Refugee Act. Since December 2017, there has also been a legislative ban on the detention of unaccompanied and separated children.

The main principles that guide state institutions in their work with unaccompanied refugee children in Bulgaria are related to the following: respecting the best interests of the child; non-discrimination; the right of the child to actively and knowingly take part in making all decisions that are important to them; the right to translation and to use skilled translators to figure out the background and life story of unaccompanied refugee children; respecting the cultural uniqueness and identity of unaccompanied refugee children; confidentiality with regard to all data relating to unaccompanied refugee children; the right of the child to access information on all decisions taken at all stages of the refugee status procedure; timely protection measures from the moment of entry into the country, early identification, and adequate care for unaccompanied refugee children; cooperation and interaction between all responsible institutions to address the problems of unaccompanied refugee children; non-applicability of the principle of "pushback" (extradition) from the territory of Bulgaria and expedited procedures for granting refugee status to unaccompanied refugee children; and consistency and distribution of responsibilities in the care of unaccompanied refugee children.

Individual conversations and informational meetings are held with the children in a language they understand and in the presence of a social worker, interpreter, or cultural mediator. An individual assessment of the child's needs is made, such as on health status, psychological status, educational needs, interests, etc. Based on this, the child is referred for placement in a foster family, with relatives, or in an appropriate social service residential care. Experts from the institutions involved in working with these children assist them with their accommodation. The child's opinion is always taken into account. A relationship of trust is established between the child and the social service specialist, who talks to them

and explains everything. This makes the protection effective and turns the shelter into a new home.

The State Agency for Refugees controls and takes measures to protect minors seeking protection in Bulgaria from physical or mental torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. In this regard, special ***secure areas*** with security guards have been set up at the SAR's registration and reception centers for refugees in the cities of Sofia and Harmanli (there are currently three such "secure areas"), to which other residents of the registration and reception center do not have access. Non-governmental organizations such as UNICEF, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, and others provide translation, legal assistance, counseling on children's rights, and opportunities for family reunification.

As a continuation of this type of policy towards refugee children, in 2025, the SAR, in cooperation with the Mission of the International Organization for Migration in Bulgaria, UNICEF Bulgaria, and four pilot municipalities in the country, launched a new project entitled "Establishment of Alternative Social Services for Unaccompanied Refugee Children in Bulgaria" [78]. The aim of this new project is not simply to accommodate unaccompanied refugee children in refugee centers, but to build a care model based on a holistic approach to the child, focusing on their individual needs and opportunities for social inclusion in Bulgaria, and including the development of an individual action plan with the child, based on the principles of child protection, respect for their rights, and the provision of sustainable and integrated support. The implementation of this new approach and new type of state policy towards refugee children ensures the sustainability of services for refugee children and the creation of a sustainable mechanism for the protection, support, and social inclusion of these children.

In 2024, the EU finally voted on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum [79], which brings together Europe's efforts in the field of migration and asylum and regulates more stringent control of external borders. The Migration and Asylum Pact is a set of new rules for managing migration and creating a common asylum system at the EU level. The Pact builds on and amends previous proposals for reforms in the field of migration, offering a comprehensive approach aimed at strengthening and integrating key EU policies in the areas of migration, asylum, border management, and integration. On 20 December 2024, Bulgaria published its National Plan for the Implementation of the EU Pact [80]. And in 2025, the National Strategy for Migration and Asylum 2025–2030 was adopted [81]. The new European legal framework on migration places new emphasis on the refugee and migration system of our country, as it is an external border of the EU. In this regard, specific measures are envisaged to protect the rights of unaccompanied refugee children seeking and receiving international protection in Bulgaria by providing quality care and access to services through the establishment of new social services—residential care for unaccompanied refugee children in four municipalities in Bulgaria. It is envisaged that the social services established will be included in the National Map of Social Services at a later stage, with a view to ensuring sustainability and state funding.

According to the National Plan for the Implementation of the Pact, adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria on 25 July 2025, and communicated to the European Commission, Bulgaria should adopt a completely new Act on Asylum and Refugees. Discussions are currently underway on the adoption of a new Asylum and Refugees Act, which, at this stage, has been announced as a Draft Law on International Protection. The draft law aims to meet the obligation for all EU Member States to bring into force provisions by 12 June 2026 to harmonize their national laws with the Asylum and Migration Pact adopted in 2024.

The new rules introduced in the proposed draft law will inevitably affect the situation of the most vulnerable, migrant children, in terms of their rights, procedural guarantees,

social and humanitarian situation, and well-being. The planned changes include the creation of two new screening centers for unaccompanied minors; increasing staff capacity, including social workers, translators, and medical personnel who also provide psychological assistance to children; building capacity to ensure access to healthcare (including mental health) and education for children, etc. Despite the proposed changes, the draft law has been met with criticism, mainly directed at the lack of safeguards for migrant children in screening and border procedures, including the admission of accelerated procedures for them.

However, the success of state policy and measures in the area of reception, integration, and welfare of refugee children seeking and receiving international protection in Bulgaria is, as already mentioned, a consequence of two groups of factors: measures taken at the state level (legislation and policies) and the attitudes of the local population. And while national legislation and policies are evolving in the direction of attempts to respond more adequately to the real situation and circumstances of refugee children, and, at the same time, making every effort to protect the public interest and the security of host societies, both Bulgarian and European public attitudes follow a different logic of development. That is why we will try to present the attitude of Bulgarian citizens towards refugee children—we will seek an answer to the question of whether refugee children elicit more sympathy, empathy, and willingness to help, or, on the contrary, are the object of indifference and even distancing.

4. Materials and Methods

In accordance with the objective of this study, it is based on the application of the sociological approach used as the main matrix for the empirical reconstruction of public opinion about refugees and, in particular, refugee children in Bulgaria. Due to the specificity of the research subject, the application of the sociological approach is combined and complemented by the application of the socio-psychological approach (the study of representations, attitudes, Bogardus scales for measuring attitudes, etc.).

The results, which will be presented and analyzed, are from a nationally representative survey on the topic, "Refugees in the perceptions of Bulgarians—fears, understanding, and empathy," conducted in 2021 as part of a project funded by the National Science Fund.

The national representative survey was conducted among Bulgarian citizens aged 18+. It was carried out using a two-stage cluster sample of 1200 people, formed by simple random selection, stratified by place of residence. The structure of the sample fully corresponds to the composition of the country's population according to data from the latest 2021 census in terms of gender, age, education, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. The selection of respondents in households was carried out through a modified Leslie Kish method (closest date of birth). Respondents were interviewed in their homes, and only Bulgarian citizens with a permanent address in the respective settlement were interviewed. The semi-standardized face-to-face interview method was used to collect statistical information. The questionnaire was developed specifically for the purposes of the project by the project team. The questionnaire is extensive, comprising a total of 91 questions, only some of which concern refugee children; however, the answers to these questions allow us to outline the specifics of public opinion in Bulgarian society regarding refugee children.

All data concerning the perceptions and attitudes of Bulgarian citizens towards refugee children, which can be derived from the study, will be presented here. Since the study was funded by the National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science, the database with the results of the study is the property of the ministry and is not available for public use.

In addition to the national representative survey conducted as part of the project funded by the National Science Fund, focus group discussions were organized in various

regions of the country with participants of different genders, ages, ethnicities, religious affiliations, education, and employment statuses. The results of these discussions will also be presented here.

All ethical principles regarding voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, personal data protection, and respect for the respondent's personality were observed in conducting both types of research—quantitative and qualitative—in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. The questionnaire for the quantitative study and the scenario for the focus group discussions were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology–EC opinion No. RD 16-784/21 December 2019.

5. Results

When listing the reasons of why persons seeking international protection in Bulgaria leave their home countries, alongside reasons such as fleeing war, escaping persecution, political, religious, or ethnic discrimination, seeking work and higher incomes, seeking better living conditions, etc., that Bulgarian citizens consider decisive in explaining the large refugee flows that have been flooding Europe for more than a decade, they also mention reasons such as so that their children can live in more stable countries and attend better schools, with the difference that the latter two reasons are shared by a much smaller proportion of the country's population.

Ranked in descending order, the reasons why refugees leave their homelands, according to Bulgarian citizens, can be presented as follows:

- Fleeing war, escaping persecution—indicated by 75.2% of respondents;
- Seeking better living conditions—indicated by 65.2% of respondents;
- Seeking work and higher incomes—indicated by 46.3% of respondents;
- Due to political, religious, ethnic, gender, and other types of discrimination—indicated by 36.0% of respondents;
- **So that their children can live in more stable countries**—indicated by 28.4% of respondents;
- To be reunited with their relatives/family members who live outside their countries of origin—indicated by 21.2% of respondents;
- **To have their children attend good schools**—indicated by 14.1% of respondents.

In this case, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because the respondents indicated more than one answer. Based on these results, Bulgarian citizens believe that the reason refugees leave their homeland and head for Europe is not so much due to a concern for their children and their future, as the reasons related to children rank last, having some of the lowest percentages in the scale of respondents' answers. A more in-depth analysis based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents shows that the highest proportion of those who indicated that refugees leave their home countries because they want their children to live in more stable countries and attend better schools are people with a higher education (13.2% and 7.8% of responses, respectively), aged 36–45 (12.1% and 8.5% of responses, respectively), and predominantly women (20.5% and 10.7% of responses respectively). Therefore, it can be said that women aged 36–45 with a higher education appear to be the most concerned about refugee children. At the same time, self-employed men with a secondary education appear to be the least interested in refugee children. Thus, only 7.9% of the responses "so that their children can live in more stable countries" and only 3.4% of the responses "to have their children attend good schools " were given by men; likewise, only 3.5% of the responses "so that their children can live in more stable countries" and only 4.3% of the responses "to have their children attend good schools " were given by self-employed persons; and only 5.2% of the responses "so that their children can live in

more stable countries" and only 4.3% of the responses "to have their children attend good schools " were given by people with a secondary education. These responses indicate that it is precisely the self-employed—who are entrepreneurs and potential employers—who do not view refugees, and refugee children in particular, as a potential future workforce or human capital in Bulgaria's labor market.

The attitude of Bulgarian citizens towards refugee children is entirely consistent with this opinion. According to data from the national representative survey, refugee children do not elicit particularly strong sympathy or compassion from Bulgarians, nor do they inspire a strong desire to support them. Here is how Bulgarian citizens respond to the question "Which of the following factors are important to you in supporting a refugee's right to stay in Bulgaria?":

- Be willing to learn Bulgarian—indicated by 84.7% of respondents;
- Accept the Bulgarian way of life—indicated by 83.7% of respondents;
- Have professional skills—indicated by 79.7% of respondents;
- Be able to support themselves—indicated by 76.7% of respondents;
- Be able to speak Bulgarian—indicated by 61.4% of respondents;
- Have a good education—indicated by 58.7% of respondents;
- Be Christian—indicated by 39.2% of respondents;
- **Be a refugee family with children—indicated by 26.4% of respondents;**
- **Be unaccompanied refugee children—indicated by 24.0% of respondents;**
- **Be a single mother with children—indicated by 21.1% of respondents;**
- Be white—indicated by 19.5% of respondents;
- Be a person with a disability/special needs—indicated by 13.4% of respondents;
- Being an unmarried/single young man—indicated by 7.3% of respondents;
- Being an unmarried/single young woman—indicated by 6.3% of respondents;
- Being Muslim—indicated by 4.5% of respondents.

In this case, too, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because respondents indicated more than one answer. As can be seen, qualities and characteristics that are more relevant to adult refugees than to refugee children are much more important to Bulgarian citizens. It is noteworthy that Bulgarian citizens consider refugees to have skills and qualities, such as language proficiency, professional skills, good education, the ability to support themselves, acceptance of the local way of life, i.e., social skills and qualities that determine the ability to successfully integrate into Bulgarian society and achieve personal well-being, more importantly. While characteristics such as religion and race/skin color are much less significant, which, if we open a parenthesis, means that the leading factors for the acceptance/rejection of refugees by Bulgarian citizens are not ethnic and religious characteristics, but rather their social qualities and skills, and when they are rejected/not accepted, it is not because of their belonging to a particular ethnic group or religion, but because they do not possess certain social qualities that determine their inability to successfully integrate into Bulgarian society. Therefore, the attitude of Bulgarian citizens towards refugees can be defined as a lack of xenophobia and rather as rejection due to a lack of trust in the ability and willingness of persons seeking international protection in Bulgaria to successfully integrate into Bulgarian society. At the same time, however, if we look again at attitudes towards refugee children, the results show that characteristics such as *unaccompanied refugee children*, *refugee families with children*, *single mothers with children*, which might be expected to elicit more sympathy and willingness to support, actually turn out to be in the second half of the scale of respondents' answers, garnering only between a quarter and a fifth of positive responses. It can be said that the greatest support for refugee children is expressed by retirees (14.6% of the responses "refugee families with children", 12.8% of responses "unaccompanied refugee children", and 10.1% of responses "single

mothers with children") and people with a primary education (10.6% of responses "refugee families with children", 9.1% of responses "unaccompanied refugee children", and 7.4% of responses "single mothers with children").

On the other hand, 89.1% of respondents said that it was not important to them at all that these were *refugee families with children* (in order to support their stay in Bulgaria), 88.6% said that it was not important to them at all that these were *single mothers with children* (in order to support their stay in Bulgaria), and 86.7% stated that it was not important to them at all that these were *unaccompanied refugee children* (in order to support their stay in Bulgaria). These responses show that between feelings of sympathy and indifference towards refugee children, Bulgarian citizens lean more towards indifference. Moreover, the youngest Bulgarian citizens, aged 18–25, expressed the highest lack of empathy. A total of 39.1% of those who stated that it was not at all important to them that this is a family of refugees with children; 44.6% of those who indicated that it is not at all important to them that this is a single mother with children; and 48.7% of those who confirmed that it is not at all important to them that these are unaccompanied refugee children—were young people in the 18–25 age group. Once again, the largest share of those expressing a lack of support for refugee children comes from the self-employed and people with a secondary education: 56.2% of those who stated that it is not at all important to them that this is a refugee family with children have a secondary education and 24.8% are self-employed; 52.7% of those who indicated that it is not at all important to them that it is a single mother with children have a secondary education and 19.6% are self-employed; and 42.5% of those who confirmed that it is not at all important to them that these are unaccompanied refugee children have a secondary education and 22.7% are self-employed. In other words, self-employed people, people with a secondary education, and the youngest people in Bulgaria once again express the least support for refugee children.

In this regard, the social distances that Bulgarian citizens demonstrate towards refugee children are measured in the survey using the indicators: "refugee children attending the same class as your children/grandchildren" and "refugee children being close friends with your children/grandchildren." The five-point Bogardus scale was used to measure distances: strongly agree; somewhat agree; neither agree nor disagree; somewhat disagree; strongly disagree. Here are the results: 29.4% of respondents agree that refugee children should study in the same class as their children/grandchildren (only answers with somewhat agree), 35.7% disagree (only answers with strongly disagree), and 28.5% are uncertain (neither agree nor disagree). The distances increase when it comes to refugee children being close friends with the children/grandchildren of respondents—those who agree were now 21.2% (only answers with somewhat agree), while those who disagree were as many as 42.9% (only answers strongly disagree). Furthermore, those who are uncertain (neither agree nor disagree) also increased to 30.5%, i.e., as the degree of closeness in contact increases, the distances also increase. Several things are striking here. The most tolerant and those demonstrating the shortest social distances are people without an education, and their willingness to accept refugee children is many times higher than that of people with higher educational degrees. To a very large extent, this is also relevant for residents of the capital—they are many times more tolerant towards refugee children compared to residents of other smaller towns and villages, which is most likely due to the fact that in the capital, as a megalopolis, people are much more accustomed to communicating with people who are different from them. The most intolerant and unwilling to communicate and coexist with refugees are the Roma, who, as the most vulnerable group in Bulgarian society, fear that by accepting refugees into Bulgaria, this could take away their status as the most underprivileged group and that, the financial resources and social assistance usually provided to them could be redirected to the refugees. Another thing is also striking:

pensioners and women, who usually emerge as some of the most tolerant people towards refugee children, in this case, demonstrate long social distances. This shows that when it comes to tolerance towards refugee children in general, the level of acceptance is relatively high, but when it comes to one's own children and grandchildren, tolerance levels drop. This, once again, emphasizes the problematic nature of tolerance towards refugee children in Bulgarian society, which, even when formally declared, in practice, especially when it affects people's personal interests, always contains relatively long social distances.

Particularly indicative of the distances between refugee children is the widely publicized case of a village in Bulgaria—the village of Kalishte (Kovachevtsi municipality)—whose residents refuse to accept refugee children into the local school alongside their children to study. The parents of the 18 students at the local school threatened to transfer their children to another school if the refugee children (from Afghanistan and Somalia) were admitted into the school. At a parents' meeting, they decided not to allow the refugee children into the school. The mayor of the village stated that he was informed by the Ministry of Education and Science at the last minute that the school in Kalishte must enroll refugee children and that if it does not, school buses will be suspended and financial sanctions will be imposed on the school. Residents are asking themselves, "Who will integrate whom?", given that there are only two local children and ten refugee children in first grade in the school. The villagers are also unhappy that the refugee children do not know Bulgarian, and the school principal has confirmed that the teachers are not qualified to teach children who have not taken a course in Bulgarian.

At the same time, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science refute the information that refugee children do not know Bulgarian and confirmed that they have completed a six-month language course. They also stated that the presence of refugee children will help prevent the school in the village of Kalishte from closing due to the small number of students enrolled, which does not meet the minimum requirements for the school's existence.

In fact, this case illustrates precisely the lack of communication between institutions and the local population and proves the fact, identified in the focus group discussions, that when residents are informed, when there is publicity and preliminary discussions with them, social distances are sharply reduced and negative attitudes are minimized.

In this regard, when asked what the state policy should be regarding refugee children, the interviewees gave the following answers:

- The state does not need to engage in supporting refugees—34.4%;
- To provide conditions for labor integration—34.3%;
- To guarantee access to healthcare—32.4%;
- To provide conditions for cultural adaptation in the Bulgarian environment—27.7%;
- To provide access to the education system and conditions for successful adaptation of refugee children in Bulgarian schools—26.2%;
- To provide conditions for inclusion in public life—22.1%;
- To provide targeted support to vulnerable groups, such as large families and single mothers, people with disabilities, unaccompanied refugee children, etc.—20.2%;
- To guarantee housing and easy access to identity documents—19.2%;
- To guarantee access to social services—18.2%;
- To provide conditions for the reunion of refugee families—11.6%.

The sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because the respondents indicated more than one answer.

What the answers show is that the largest share—one-third of Bulgarian citizens—believe that the state should not engage in supporting refugees at all, which confirms the generally negative attitudes of the Bulgarian population towards accepting refugees in Bulgaria. The

highest shares, in this case, are also represented by people with higher educational levels, such as higher and secondary education; the youngest Bulgarian citizens (18–25 years old); men; self-employed and employed persons; and the Roma. As for the support that Bulgarians believe the state should provide to refugees, Bulgarian citizens' support for refugees' access to healthcare is relatively high, as this is one of the basic and vital rights of people. However, when asked whether "Refugees should benefit from the same health insurance rights as Bulgarian citizens?" the respondents' answers were divided—41.1% answered "yes", but 42.4% said "no". These responses, on the one hand, show a truly high level of support for refugees' access to healthcare in the country, as it is a basic human right. However, on the other hand, this shows that their rights, according to the respondents, should not be equated with the rights of Bulgarian citizens, which is understandable given the high sensitivity of the population on the topic of healthcare, and especially considering the high costs that Bulgarian citizens pay for healthcare services.

The provision of conditions for cultural adaptation in the Bulgarian environment and access to the educational system, including conditions for the successful adaptation of refugee children in schools, also receives relatively high support from Bulgarian citizens. However, although approximately one-third of Bulgarian citizens support the right of refugees to education, when it comes to them benefiting from any privileges in this regard, attitudes are again categorically negative. Thus, 87.4% of Bulgarian citizens believe that a privileged admission of refugees to higher education institutions in the country is unacceptable, and only 3.9% would support such a state policy. Also, 83.8% of respondents disagree with financial relief regarding administrative fees for higher education for refugees, and only 6.5% agree to accept such a proposal. In other words, Bulgarians are relatively tolerant when it comes to guaranteeing basic human rights for refugees, such as the right to healthcare and education, but they categorically disagree when it comes to refugees receiving any type of financial assistance in the form of social assistance. Those who most categorically disagree, in this regard, are the Roma and pensioners, the two groups most reliant on social assistance from the state. This is probably why one of the lowest levels of support is received by the provision through state policy of targeted assistance to vulnerable groups of refugees—large families and single mothers, people with disabilities, unaccompanied refugee children, etc., as well as refugees' access to social services. Therefore, the question "Do you think refugees should receive social benefits for their minor children?" gathered a high percentage of disapproval—45.6% answered "no" against 33.4% "yes", and 21% could not answer. The highest share of negative answers, in this case, was given by parents with children aged 26–35 and 36–45, as well as the unemployed, pensioners, housewives, and Roma. In other words, whenever support for refugees and their children directly affects a certain social group of the Bulgarian population and threatens to harm its interests, it reacts negatively.

The Bulgarian state's commitments to refugee children and unaccompanied refugee children, according to the opinion of Bulgarian citizens, should be reduced to caring for their health (31.7%), caring for their education (26.4%), and caring for ensuring appropriate living conditions (24.9%). The conclusions drawn so far are confirmed again: the respondents expressing support for a state policy oriented towards caring for refugee children is not particularly high; however, to the extent that such a policy is still supported, it is very limited in certain areas, such as mostly healthcare and education, and to a lesser extent, social support and services. Furthermore, positively, only 10.1% of respondents stated that the Bulgarian state should not be involved in caring for refugee children and unaccompanied refugee children. Unfortunately, this does not come at the expense of those who support policies dedicated to refugee children, as their proportion does not exceed one-third of Bulgarian citizens. Instead, it comes at the expense of those who hesitate and

cannot make a decision, accounting for 45.9% of all respondents. (In this case, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100% since respondents indicated more than one answer).

However, how do Bulgarian citizens assess the extent to which the Bulgarian state is actually committed to caring for refugee children and unaccompanied refugee children? The largest share of respondents—31.7%—confirm that the state is committed to caring for the health of refugee children; in second place are those who say that the state is committed to the education of refugee children—26.4%; and in third place, according to survey respondents, the state is committed to providing adequate living conditions for refugee children—24.9%. One-tenth of respondents believe that the state does not provide any care for refugee children. The largest share of respondents, 45.9% (or almost half), have no opinion on state policy regarding refugee children, which actually speaks to indifference and a lack of interest in this issue and, as a result, a lack of knowledge. To a large extent, the distance and indifference shown by Bulgarian citizens towards refugee children can be explained by their lack of knowledge about the culture and way of life of refugees, as the unknown tends to provoke distance and rejection. This is why, when asked, "What do you like about refugee culture?", "What do you not like about refugee culture?" and "If you had the opportunity, what would you change in refugee culture?", the largest share of responses were "I am not familiar with their culture"—83.7%, 78.5%, and 85.2% of responses, respectively.

The results of this study indicate the existence of significant cultural differences between Bulgarian citizens and refugees, which hinder the integration of refugees into Bulgarian society, including refugee children. The so-called "cultural gap" between newcomers and the host community is the main obstacle in this process [82]. D. Black defines cultural distances as "cultural diversity or differences in the content of culture" [83].

Among the aspects of refugee culture that Bulgarian citizens find most objectionable are *gender relations* (indicated by 19.2% of respondents), *family relations* (indicated by 9.3% of respondents), *clothing* (indicated by 9.2% of respondents), *lifestyle* (indicated by 9% of respondents), and *customs and traditions* (indicated by 8.8% of respondents). In contrast to these views, *food* (indicated by 6.7% of respondents), *family relationships* (indicated by 6.6% of respondents), and *attitudes toward children* (indicated by 4.8% of respondents) receive the strongest approval from Bulgarian citizens, i.e., in their view, these are the elements of refugee culture that are the least likely to cause social distance.

Further details and clarification regarding the specific cultural differences that separate Bulgarian citizens and refugees can be found in the responses to the question, "If you had the opportunity, what would you change about the culture of refugees?" What Bulgarians most strongly wish to change about refugees are *their lifestyle* (indicated by 15.4% of respondents), *their clothing* (indicated by 7% of respondents), and *gender relations and family relationships* (both indicated by 5.4% of respondents), i.e., the elements of refugee culture that they disapprove the most, and the stated desire for change is precisely a reflection of the cultural differences that divide Bulgarian citizens and refugees.

Some of the statements made by participants in the focus group discussions provide a clearer picture of the differences in lifestyle and culture:

> "They tend to have many children, while we have few. They say that when they return to their countries, they will have another 3–4 children... There was a woman with three children who said: 'For me, these are few children. I want three more.' But how will she feed these children if she doesn't want to work? She says that women don't work in Syria." (A female who is a pensioner, aged 75, and who is a participant in focus group discussions)

> "In my opinion, they live in a completely different way from Bulgarians... They have different beliefs that are unacceptable to us. They are of a different faith,

from a different continent." (A female who works in the mayor's office and is 28 years old; a participant in focus group discussions)

6. Discussion

The results of the surveys conducted among Bulgarian citizens clearly show that the social and cultural distances between the local population and refugees, and the lack of knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures and ways of life, are at the root of rejection in some cases, and indifference and lack of empathy in others. However, what is worrying and raises questions is that this indifference and rejection even extends to groups that normally elicit more sympathy and compassion, such as children. And while rejection of adult refugees is based on their lack of social skills and qualities that would enable them to integrate successfully into society, in the case of refugee children, this would be difficult to argue, as children, being at the beginning of their lives, could develop very successfully and achieve fulfillment in society with the appropriate social support. Negative and prejudiced attitudes deprive refugee children of the opportunity to find their place in Bulgarian society, as well as to grow, to be educated and develop, and to achieve an adequate level of well-being. Labeling them at such an early stage in their lives, placing them in the category of unwanted and unaccepted, predetermines their path in life, as well as their desire to leave the country and move to other countries in search of a better life.

Positive decisions are made in an attempt to place oneself in the shoes of another who is in trouble and in need of help, in an attempt to know and understand them, because for people who never try to know others and place themselves in their shoes, differences are the grounds that legitimize rejection. In contrast, people who try to know and understand others are willing to accept them despite being aware of the social and cultural distances that separate them from one another. Refugee children, despite having lost their homes and homelands, and often being separated from their families and left alone, can still build new lives and futures if they are welcomed into societies where they settle, given the opportunity to grow up in a safe environment, and supported in developing their abilities. However, the results of this study show that Bulgarian society is still far from this point, as evidenced by the fact that rejection and indifference towards others extend even to vulnerable and usually sympathetic and compassionate groups as children. In this sense, public attitudes toward refugee children in Bulgaria do not support state policy and legislation, which, although imperfect and experience shortcomings and contradictions, are nevertheless aimed at creating optimal conditions for the reception and integration, as well as ensuring the well-being of refugee children in keeping with national and European priorities. The hypothesis stated at the beginning of this study is confirmed: the more negative the public attitudes, the greater the barriers to the implementation of a successful state policy aimed at integrating and ensuring the well-being of refugee children in Bulgarian society. The empirical research conducted categorically shows that public opinion and public policies in the country are moving in different directions, and negative public opinion hinders the implementation of positive state policies.

The findings of this article are supported by research and analyses of refugee children in the European context. The issue of the gap between political measures and their practical implementation is highlighted by Garayová [84], who demonstrates the ineffectiveness of legal frameworks in various practical situations in Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland, emphasizing the need for effective protection of the rights of refugee and migrant children. Research conducted on refugee children and their difficulties in educational integration [85] identifies several challenges, including limited access to schooling, administrative and language barriers, and insufficient support for their inclusion in European school systems. Therefore, targeted interventions, such as additional language classes and

participation in early childhood education, are necessary to increase school attendance and improve learning outcomes [86]. Taken together, these studies underscore the relevance of the present article and its positioning within the broader stream of research efforts by European scholars.

However, the novelty of the present article lies in its analysis of the welfare of refugee children as a result of the interaction between state policies and various public attitudes such as fear, empathy, and acceptance. In this context, it is emphasized that even well-designed policies can fail if they are not supported by society, and the more negative public opinion is, the smaller the chance of implementing positive government policies aimed at refugee children. Furthermore, an important contribution of this article is its specific focus on refugee children rather than on refugees as a group. In general, children are exposed to a higher risk of trauma and social isolation, as they are often without a stable family environment and have a need for education, psychological support, and protection. This highlights the socio-political and humanitarian aspects of the issue. Another novel contribution is the presentation of concrete results for Bulgaria, obtained from a representative sociological survey, showing the predominantly hesitant or negative attitudes toward refugees, the existence of social distance, as well as the presence of mixed feelings such as compassion, fear, and distrust at a societal level. In this context, this article advances the thesis that the successful integration of refugee children depends on the interplay between society's readiness to accept them and the willingness of the refugees themselves to integrate, thereby developing a more complex approach to the topic.

7. Conclusions

Armed conflicts, political instability, natural disasters, and climate change, the modern world faces many challenges for children. Choosing to be a refugee is one of the most difficult decisions in life because it means giving up everything you are used to in life—your home, family, homeland—and embarking on a difficult and uncertain journey. When you are a child, and the choice of uprooting life is usually not yours but is imposed by circumstances beyond your control, the challenge of being a refugee is even greater. This is due to the fact that transforming from a "foreigner" to "one of us" and being accepted into a new society is a process that takes not just years, but generations. Here, we have attempted to present public perceptions and attitudes towards refugee children in Bulgaria and to show to what extent and whether they are in line with state policy and legislation regarding refugee children. We did this because we believe that understanding public opinion on a given issue is important for finding a solution to that particular issue, as public opinion often determines the success or failure of certain state policies and decisions on issues that are key to the functioning of society. Here, we would like to quote once again from a focus group discussion held in a Bulgarian village, which is striking in its contradictions but very indicative of Bulgarian citizens' attitudes toward refugees arriving in Europe from the Middle East and North Africa:

"We must return to the time when people lived on their own continent. We are Europeans. We have the right to travel throughout Europe, to live and work throughout Europe. Our children and grandchildren have the right to work in other European countries. But Asians, Africans, Arabs, and their children do not have the right to come to Europe; they should not come to our country. They should stay where they are, on their own continents. We do not want them here." (Male, 75, retired).

It is indisputable that we cannot turn time back to when everyone lived only in their own country and on their own continent, and whether such a time ever existed at all. There are many examples in history of great movements of people, but this is hardly required to convince us of the obvious facts. Today, as we overcome geographical, historical,

and cultural boundaries, "the other," "the different", and "the foreigner" are becoming increasingly closer to us. Once a temporary irritant, today's foreignness has become a permanent condition, says Z. Bauman [34]. It is evident that migration cannot be stopped, and technological developments will increasingly make mobility a part of modern life. All this means that the time has come (or that this time has never passed) to learn to live in the constant company of "foreigners" in conditions of uncertainty and insecurity, to try to accept them, to carry "the other" within ourselves, to be tolerant of "others", culturally "different", and "foreign," to try to make them at least a little closer and more familiar, because the more people get to know the big world outside and the many different people who inhabit it, the more positive their attitudes toward "different" people become, and the more secure the world around us becomes. In this regard, the stories of refugee children and their life experiences and fates, which Bulgarian society does not know and seems unwilling to learn about or listen to currently, would help us to understand them better, see the line beyond which everything human begins to crumble, and attempt not to cross it. But the same is true for "the other"—"the foreigner"—because acceptance and understanding are two-way processes, and by imposing one's own norms, rules, and culture, one cannot make society accept you, much less keep you. And the most open, in this respect, are children, who are always ready to explore the world around them, to perceive the new things that surround them, and to integrate these perceptions into their inner world and value system.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SAR	State Agency for Refugees
CM	Council of Ministers
EU	European Union
CSD	Center for the Study of Democracy
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ARA	Asylum and Refugee Act
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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