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EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION OF CHILDREN REFUGEES AND CHILDREN FROM TRADITIONAL MINORITIES IN BULGARIA

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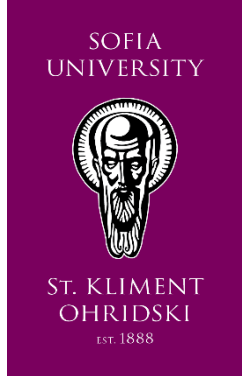




Refugee flows in Bulgaria nowadays

Over **the past three decades**, the sociocultural diversity in Bulgaria has increased due to **the passing refugee flows**, which poses a number of issues related to the **social and educational integration of children seeking and receiving international protection**, including **temporary protection** for citizens of Ukraine.

It's very important social workers, teachers and other specialists **to apply more adequate and successful practices** regarding the **effective social and educational inclusion of children**.



TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN BY NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED DURING THE PERIOD 01.01.1993 – 31.03.2025

1.	Syria	69467
2.	Afghanistan	56692
3.	Iraq	23934
4.	Morocco	7886
5.	Pakistan	4124

https://aref.government.bg/sites/default/files/2025-04/Top%205-bulg_03.pdf

Statistical dimensions of children in international protection in Bulgaria

The data for the first three months of 2025 indicate that:

- Number of children **granted refugee status**: 15 from Syria (11 – 0-13 age and 4 – 14-17 age) – **44% from all persons**.
- Number of children granted **humanitarian status**: 151, age 0-13 - from Syria (147), Iraq (2), without citizenship (2); 33, age 14-17 – from Syria (32), Afghanistan (1) – **57% from all persons**
- Number of **girls** with refugee status: 7 (0-13); 2 (14-17) - **9**
- Number of **boys** with refugee status: 4 (0-13); 2 (14-17) - **6**
- Number of girls with humanitarian status: 65 (0-13); 7 (14-17) - **72**
- Number of boys with refugee status: 86 (0-13); 26 (14-17) - **112**

<https://aref.government.bg/%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F>



Unaccompanied minors – seeking asylum Official data – first 3 months of 2025

- Afghanistan - 52;
- Egypt - 23;
- Syria - 20;
- Morocco - 9;
- Tunisia - 3;
- Iraq - 3;
- Algeria - 1.

- <https://aref.government.bg/%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F>

Special attention – in the Protected Zones only for unaccompanied minors

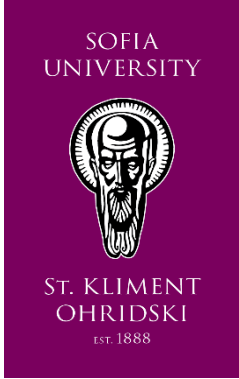
Safe zones for unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in the Registration-reception center of State agency for refugees in Sofia.

It was an initiative of the mission of International Organization for Migration in Sofia.

The first zone in Voenna Rampa was opened on June 19, 2019, with a capacity of **100 children**.

The second zone was opened in Ovcha Kupel in January 2020, with a capacity of **138 children**.

<https://academia.bcrm-bg.org/2022/01/19/%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D1%80%D0%BF/>



Special attention – in the Protected Zones only for unaccompanied minors

As of May 2024, before the opening of the third Zone, the number of unaccompanied children was **about 70% of all children** who have sought international protection in Bulgaria.

The third zone was opened in town Harmanly – in Registration-Reception Center, near to Bulgarian – Turkish border, on May, 16, 2024, with a capacity of **98 children**.

Collaboration between State Agency for Refugees, UNICEF, International Organization for Migration and State Department for Migration – Switzerland.

There are **separate rooms for girls** as well as **for children with disabilities**.

„The goal is for every child to receive appropriate care and protection, support for placement in a social service, monitoring of the individual case and needs, as well as the opportunity to be reunited with their family.“

<https://aref.government.bg/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8/%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8-%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%86-%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B8>



Fun drawing session organized from the cultural mediator with unaccompanied children - to draw a portrait of another child at Ovcha Kupel Protected Zone – January, 2025

<https://bulgaria.iom.int/bg/news/zanimatelna-sesiya-po-risuvane-v-za-nepridruzheni-deca-v-rpc-sofiya-kv-ovcha-kupel>





Activities for unaccompanied children at Voenna Rampa Protected Zone – November, 2024

<https://bulgaria.iom.int/bg/news/tvorcheski-zanimaniya-za-nepridruzheni-deca-v-sigurnata-zona-na-mom-blgariya-v-rpc-sofiya-kv-voena-rampa>





Main challenges in the social work with unaccompanied minors

- **“Access to alternative care and social services (such as foster care, family-type accommodation centers, transitional or sheltered housing)”**
- Such kind of services “provide children with security, a sense of belonging, and a family-like environment, which is essential for the child’s well-being and development”.
- **“Despite efforts to increase the number and capacity of children’s services in the country in recent years, many of them are still not prepared to work with refugee children in order to meet their specific needs.”**

<https://aref.government.bg/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8/%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8-%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%86-%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B8>



Unaccompanied minors from the Save zones participated in the 43 state championship for children at risk, 29.05.2025, Sofia – football

<https://aref.government.bg/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8/43-%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%88%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B8-%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA>





Planting trees in an eco-action - children of the refugee center in the town of Harmanli together with the regional governor, April, 2025

<https://aref.government.bg/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8/%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%B4%D0%B6%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80-%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%8F%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B0-%E2%80%9E%D0%BA%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B0%E2%80%9C>





Attitudes of local people: a recent example

<https://telegraph.bg/bulgaria/novini/prez-2026-godina-otvariat-5-centyra-za-nepridruzheni-deca-bezhanci.-shte-bydat-v-obshtinite-sofiia-burgas-tundzha-i-malko-tyrnovo-430518>

Five **family-type accommodation centers** for refugee children aged 3-18 and **one transitional housing unit** are planned to be opened in early 2026 - in the city of Sofia, the municipalities of Burgas, Tundzha and Malko Tarnovo.

The State Agency for Refugees has allocated around 1 500 000 euros for construction and renovation activities and around 400 000 euros for equipment and furnishings.

The centers are expected to accommodate up to 12 children, and up to 8 in housing. This project is being implemented with the assistance of UNICEF and IOM.



Attitudes of local people: a recent example

<https://telegraph.bg/bulgaria/novini/prez-2026-godina-otvariat-5-centyra-za-nepridruzheni-deca-bezhanci.-shte-bydat-v-obshtinite-sofiia-burgas-tundzha-i-malko-tyrnovo-430518>

But – reactions from the local people:

The mayor of the Vitosha district in Sofia wants **only girls to be accommodated.**

In October 2024, residents of this area protested because they were “categorically against the opening of such a place”.

A woman's opinion on this occasion: “How quietly they decided to build a refugee camp in the Vitosha region without public discussion. **Young refugees of Arab origin will walk undisturbed through our neighborhoods** and streets to integrate... Apparently **our children will have to stay locked up in their homes for safety.**”



The profile of Ukrainian citizens seeking temporary protection

Among Ukrainian citizens:

- the **Christian religion dominates;**
- **their mother tongue is from the Slavic language group;**
- **understanding can be more easily achieved when communicating with Bulgarian speakers.**

Official data from the State Agency for Refugees – Temporary protection

The total number of Ukrainians who passed through Bulgaria in 2022 was 976 776.

People with temporary protection, registered in Bulgaria:

149 685 /2022/; first 3 months - 112 918

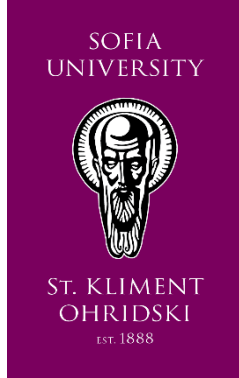
38 091/2023/; first 3 months - 5 795

24 536/2024/; first 3 months - 4 831

- /2025/; first 3 months - 3 840

Total number: 201 203

[- https://aref.government.bg/sites/default/files/2025-04/TPD_BG_03.pdf](https://aref.government.bg/sites/default/files/2025-04/TPD_BG_03.pdf)



Ukrainian students in Bulgarian educational system

- According to data from UNICEF, as of February 2024, **only 20% of Ukrainian students residing in Bulgaria with temporary protection are studying in Bulgarian schools.**
- The reasons for this fact are stated: "some **continue to study online at Ukrainian educational institutions**; some **believe that the war will end at any moment and expect to return to their homeland**; there are **differences in education systems**; in the implementation of the settlement program, larger communities have emerged in places where there are not enough schools or job opportunities“.

Only 20% of Ukrainian children are included in the Bulgarian education system. BNR. <https://bnr.bg/sofia/post/101954639/maria-ankova-unicef>

New measures were being taken in this direction. The government has provided about 150 000 euros for **free transportation from accommodation to school** for students with temporary protection from Ukraine for the entire school year - from September 16, 2024 to June 30, 2025. **The largest number of students** are educated in educational institutions in the districts of Burgas and Varna (**on the Black Sea coast**). They are enrolled in schools with available places, some of the children attend more distant educational institutions.

<https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/dyrzhavata-osiguriava-bezplaten-transport-za-ukrainskite-uchenici-u-nas-2397504>



Ukrainian students in Bulgarian educational system

Many efforts were made in this direction, including already at the very beginning of the arrival of the large flow of Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria in the spring of 2022 and the presence of positive practices for the inclusion of Ukrainian children in the Bulgarian education system, e.g. **"Welcome to School" campaign**, when "families are informed about the steps to enroll in kindergarten and school, as well as about the positives of this - obtaining a European diploma, learning the Bulgarian language, other support, etc."

But there is still much to be done in the direction of **convincing children and parents of the benefits of receiving education in Bulgarian schools**, which is of undoubted mutual benefit for both Bulgarian and Ukrainian citizens from the point of view of coexistence, which already lasts longer for three years.



UKRAINIAN VULIK

Educational and integration center of Ukrainian community in Sofia

<https://www.uaaid.org.ua/bg>





UKRAINIAN VULIK

Educational and integration center of Ukrainian community in Sofia

<https://www.uaaid.org.ua/bg>

Activities for children from 2 to 17 years old:

- kindergarten;
- preschool;
- teenage platform - English, Bulgarian and Ukrainian language courses;
- creative activities, dancing, festivals and other activities.

For children with special educational needs:

- speech therapist;
- child psychologist;
- occupational therapist;
- art therapy.



Ukrainian Educational Hub in Sofia The finish of the second school year

<https://bnr.bg/en/post/102011244/graduates-of-the-ukrainian-educational-hub-in-sofia-will-continue-their-education-in-Bulgaria>





Ukrainian Educational Hub in Sofia

“Every Ukrainian child dreams of returning to their homeland and of peace there”

<https://bnr.bg/en/post/102011244/graduates-of-the-ukrainian-educational-hub-in-sofia-will-continue-their-education-in-Bulgaria>

“The center offers all-day training and although there are two shifts in just 10 rooms, students attend it daily and with great desire.”

In an interview with Radio Bulgaria, the coordinator of the center, Elena Volkova, tells about **the hopes of Ukrainian children in this country and how they see their future:**

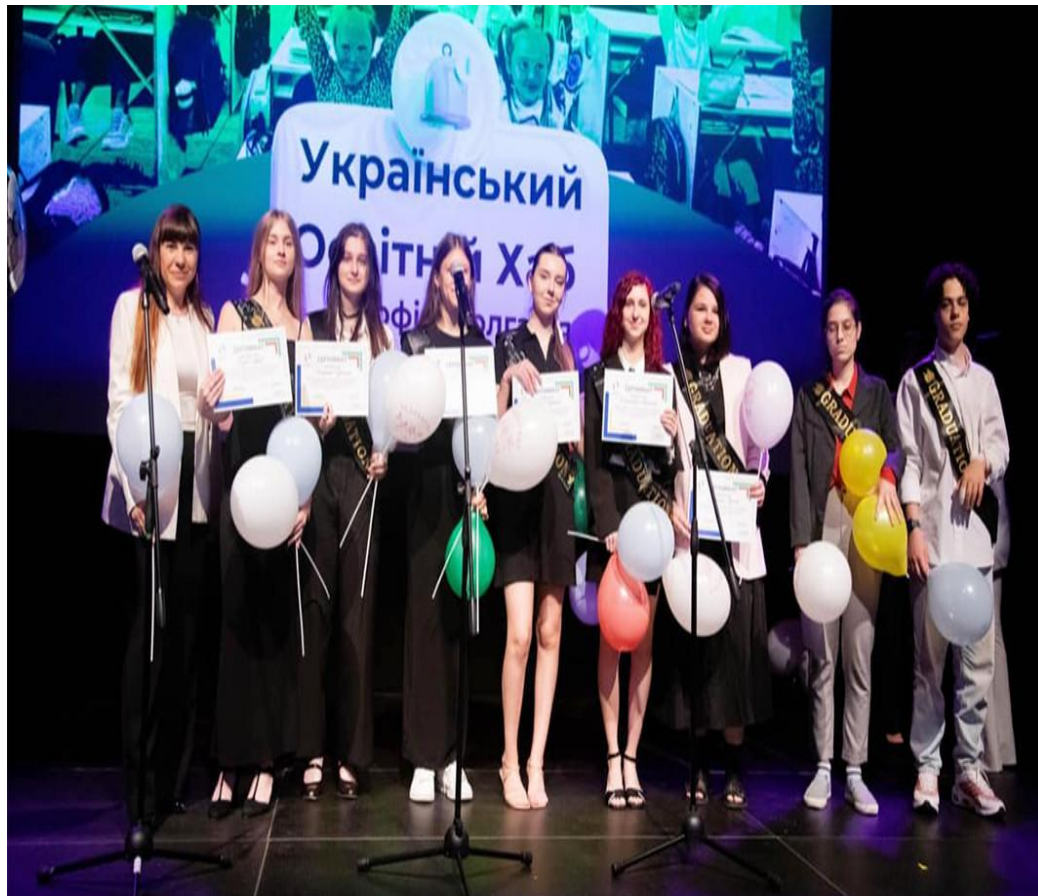
"Of course, every child wishes to return to their native house, to their native town, to study together with their classmates in their homeland, where there is peace. Graduates want to continue studying and developing here in Bulgaria. There are 12 students in the 11th grade and **they all plan to study in Bulgarian universities.**"



Ukrainian Educational Hub in Sofia

“Every Ukrainian child dreams of returning to their homeland and of peace there”

<https://bnr.bg/en/post/102011244/graduates-of-the-ukrainian-educational-hub-in-sofia-will-continue-their-education-in-Bulgaria>





Bulgarian educational policy toward children with international and temporary protection

There is a text that is uploaded on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science in three languages - Bulgarian, Ukrainian and English "**Information on the procedure for admission and education of children and students of preschool and school age from Ukraine in Bulgarian state and municipal kindergartens and schools**", to which is attached link to the Regional Directorates of Education, where applications for training are submitted.

The text consistently **describes the necessary steps that must be taken by the parents and the documents that are necessary for registration**, as well as the commitments of the principals when children and students enter kindergartens and schools:

- **"additional training in Bulgarian as a foreign language"**;
- **"psychological support when necessary"**;
- **"resource support for children and students with special educational needs"**.



Educational policy regarding refugee children in Bulgaria

The main document - **Regulation No.3 of 06.04.2017 on the terms and conditions for admission and training of persons seeking or receiving international protection.**

"the provision of **free education in state and municipal schools of the Republic of Bulgaria under the conditions and according to the order for Bulgarian citizens**".

For children of compulsory preschool age, "additional modules are provided in the educational field of **Bulgarian language**", and for students of compulsory school age (up to 16 years) - "additional training in Bulgarian language and literature", as well as "additional training in Bulgarian language as foreign“



Needs of children – migrants and refugees derived from policies related to inclusive education in Bulgaria

- **Need for a very good command of the Bulgarian language**, which is a condition for an adequate understanding of the taught content and its successful assimilation. It is a **prerequisite for reducing low learning outcomes and the eventual dropout from the educational system** in a certain period.
- **Need for education together in a common educational environment** with Bulgarian children and students **as a basic prerequisite for reducing negative prejudices and stereotypes**, as well as an incentive for improving the command of the Bulgarian language and **enrichment in terms of mutual socialization**.
- **Need for development of intercultural competences** as necessary personal qualities for a successful social life.
- At the level of educational policy, such as developed normative documents, there is actually **a lack of emphasis related to the sociocultural identity** of these children.

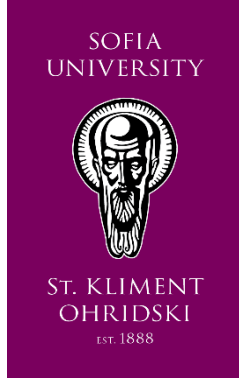


Main problems

Children refugees cannot always provide **evidence of a completed educational degree** and there is a possibility **to be enrolled in a lower class.**

There are **teachers who are not prepared** to work with children with other mother tongue and cultural specificities.

There may be **resistance from some parents** their children to be educated with refugee children.



Learning Bulgarian language

UNHCR and its partners in the country provide **a variety of free and accessible study materials in Bulgarian language:**

- **Bulgarian language - levels A1, A2, B1, B2** - textbooks, exercise books, notebooks - dictionaries, audio files, grammars, including translations into English, French, Arabic, Farsi
- **educational materials in Bulgarian on refugee-related issues** for different age groups - 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 years;
- various didactic materials supporting the study of the Bulgarian language, developed through projects by non-governmental organizations.

<https://www.unhcr.org/bg/materials>

Other social activities

There are additional opportunities outside the school system - through courses offered by non-governmental organizations, as well as **involvement in various social activities and projects**, organized for example by the Refugee and Migrant Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas – Sofia, Reachout Bulgaria and others, also by the State Agency for Refugees and the mission of the International Organization for Migration.

Such activities have, on the one hand, **a strong socialization character**, including **orientation in the social environment** in the settlement and beyond - **through art activities, excursions, sports activities, visits to museums, etc.**, and on the other hand – they are aimed at **maintaining the cultural identity of refugee children**.



Mental health

- “Some refugee children may suffer from stress or trauma because of difficult events they have experienced as a result of being displaced.
- Mental health issues can interfere with learning processes, so it is crucial that these are addressed to allow displaced children to return to regular learning as much as possible.”
- “Children who suffer from stress or trauma may need professional help from qualified personnel. Teachers can help detect potential signs so children can be directed to adequate support structures. They should, however, never intervene when only qualified therapists should.”

[UNHCR Teaching About Refugees 2021 - Stress and Trauma Guidebook | UNHCR](#)

Effects of stress and trauma on learning -

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees>



UNHCR Teaching resources

- <https://www.youtube.com/@unhcrteachingaboutrefugees8219>
- <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees>



Resources about refugees

Who is migrant - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRPfM5Oj-QA>

Who is a refugee - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvzZGplGbL8>

Who is a Internally Displaced Person -

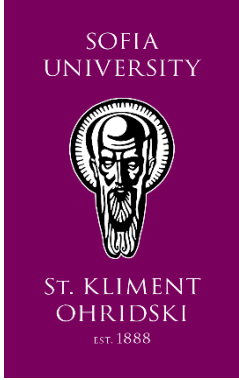
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCzpVQkencw>

Who helps refugees - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNHHx4Uxs_s

Where do refugees come from? -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrR5hwp45mc>

Fact sheets - [NHCR Teaching About Refugees 2021 - Fact sheets - Eye Openers | UNHCR](#)



Teaching about refugees

Resources by age

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees/teaching-materials-ages-6-9>

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees/teaching-materials-ages-9-12>

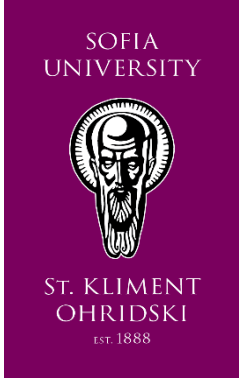
<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees/teaching-materials-ages-12-15>

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees/teaching-materials-ages-15-18>

Stories of Refugee Education - <https://unhcr.pageflow.io/becoming-who-we-are#300632>

<https://unhcr.pageflow.io/becoming-who-we-are#300632>

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees>



Platform

Refugee Integration in Bulgaria

Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants

<https://refugee-integration.bg/en/>

Sectors of integration

- Identity documents
- Housing
- Helthcare and health services
- Education
- Employment
- Social assistance
- Family reunification
- Citizenship



Mother tongues of children refugees

While the mother tongues of the four main traditional minorities in Bulgaria can be studied at school, such an opportunity is missing for children with refugee status regarding their mother tongues. The only possibility is **if they are educated in private schools** where there is **an instruction in their mother tongues, for example Arabic.**

For Ukrainian children such a possibility is their inclusion in **specific educational structures organized from Ukrainian refugees**, for example Ukrainian Educational Hub in Sofia.

The Education Hub hosts over 180 students aged 6 to 17 and who study in two shifts. It provides **full-day, on-site academic classes, Bulgarian language lessons, IT training, psychological support and extracurricular activities** in partnership with local schools, ensuring that children experience a gradual and smooth transition into the Bulgarian education system.

UNICEF. Ukrainian Education Hub offers a glimpse of hope for refugee children in Sofia. Accessed 11 September, 2024 Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/ukrainianeducation-hub-offers-glimpse-hope-refugee-children-sofia>

Population in Bulgaria Traditional ethnic groups that lives from centuries on this territory

- The **Bulgarian** ethnic group is the largest, appr. 84%.
- The **Turkish** ethnic group – appr. 10%.
- The **Roma** – appr. 5% (non-official data – more than 10%-15%).
Main cause – differences in identification of Roma people.
- After that – Armenian, Jews etc.

- The *biggest problems are with the social integration of Roma people*,



Traditional ethnic groups

The main priorities of the state education policy regarding children from ethnic minorities:

- they must study together with children from the majority and other minorities in a unified educational environment,
- they can develop different aspects of their cultural identity – mother language, religion, traditions.



Traditional ethnic groups

Mother tongue and Religion - elective subjects in public schools

Currently, there are publicly available programs:

- for the subject "Mother Language" in the following variants: **Turkish, Hebrew, Armenian and Romany** for students from grades 1st to 7th (the period of basic education in Bulgaria)
- for the subject "Religion" in three variants: **Christianity - Orthodoxy, Islam and Non-confessional education** from 1st to 12th grade (the period of full secondary education in Bulgaria).



Roma in Bulgaria



Turks in Bulgaria



Karakachans in Bulgaria

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKSaCbVe_hI



Tatars in Bulgaria



Armenians in Bulgaria



Bulgarians

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAkKnmbwWLE>



All children together



Thank you for your attention!

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