

Going from **85 483**  
to **53 811** steps forward  
backward away  
from the integrated  
society

The Experience of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian  
Cultural Sector after February 24, 2022.

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**VOLYN  
FOUNDATION**

# FOREWORD

This research is part of Project “85 483”, initiated by the A25 Cultural Foundation and implemented between 2022 and 2023. In 2022, at the start of the Project, the number of Ukrainians in Bulgaria was 85 483. Currently this number is 53 811 and is further decreasing as, according to the NGOs working with Ukrainians, more and more of those residing in Bulgaria are returning to their homeland.

The aim of the project is to highlight the cultural needs of Ukrainian citizens who have sought refuge in Bulgaria, and the reactions of the Bulgarian cultural sector to this new audience, placing both groups within the long-term horizon with the objective of addressing new audiences and achieving a future stable integrated Bulgarian society. The study comprises four sections. The first was prepared by the Ukrainian “Volyn” Foundation and offers a multi-layered profile of the cultural situation in Ukraine in terms of cultural policies, governance, consumption and attitudes. The second traces the reactions of the Bulgarian cultural sector in the process of involving foreign

citizens in the life of society, including best practices and weak links. The third section examines Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria as potential new audiences with their own cultural attitudes and interests. The fourth section serves as a roadmap outlining the steps towards more efficient engagement of Ukrainians as an audience and more sustainable integration activities of cultural operators.

The study should not be perceived as a scientific publication. Its aim is to serve as a starting point for cultural policy making and cultural policy discussions.

A25 would like to express its gratitude to the “Volyn” Foundation team and personally to Anna Danylchuk, to David Kyuranov, to all focus group participants and to the representatives of the “Arms Wide Open” Association, “For the Good” Integration Centre, the “It Depends on Us” Humanitarian Centre and Ukrainian Kosher, without whose contribution this publication would not have been possible.

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# UKRAINIAN CULTURE, 2023

**ANNA DANYLCHUK**

Occupied by the Soviet Union and hidden behind the Iron Curtain for decades, Ukraine, as many other ex-Soviet republics, was terra incognita for the global audience. The recent Russian invasion and brave Ukrainian resistance, apart from hundreds of tragic and heroic events, led to the informational rediscovery of Ukraine and growing interest in its history, culture and modern realities.

**Paradoxically, the war that started with the denial of the existence of unique Ukrainian culture led to its popularization and global recognition.**

This article will provide you with a brief outlook on Ukrainian state cultural policy, main cultural institutions, reforms, the booming NGO sector and art educational opportunities.

Ukraine is a unitary democratic parliamentary-presidential republic with a multi-party political system. The main

institutions of state power are: the President, legislative, executive and judicial authorities. The executive power is represented by the Cabinet of Ministers (the government) and central and local executive power bodies. The legislative body (the Parliament) is known as the Verkhovna Rada. Within the Rada, deputies are organized into separate Committees – bodies of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which carry out preparatory work and control performance in specific areas of legislation.

In general, cultural legislation in Ukraine is rooted in the Constitution. The main principles of the Ukrainian cultural policy are: recognition of culture as one of the main factors of the Ukrainian nation's identity as well as of national minorities living on the territory of Ukraine; strengthening of humanistic ideas, high moral bases of social life, orientation towards national and universal values and recognition of their priority over political and group interests; preservation and augmenting of cultural properties; development of cultural relations with Ukrainians living abroad as the foundations of preservation of integrity of the Ukrainian culture; ensuring freedom of creative activities, non-intervention of State, political

parties and other public institutions into the processes of artistic creation; equality of rights and possibilities of citizens irrespective of their social status and nationality in creation, use, and circulation of cultural values; accessibility of cultural values, of all types of cultural services and cultural activities for every citizen; ensuring conditions for creative development of an individual, enhancement of cultural level and aesthetic education of citizens; encouraging organizations, enterprises, public institutions, religious organizations and individuals in exercising charitable activities in the sphere of culture; comprehensive international cooperation in the cultural sphere; recognition of priority of international legal acts in the sphere of culture; combination of State and public factors in ensuring the development of culture (*UNESCO Cultural Heritage Laws Database, n.d., #*).

**The Committee on Humanitarian and Information Policy**, which includes culture as a part of its priority work, was established in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of the 9th convocation on August 29, 2019. The committee consists of 17 deputies and the chairperson (About the Committee, 2023). The tasks of the Committee include:

1. cultural and educational activities (publishing, librarianship, folk arts and crafts);
2. cultural and artistic activity (professional creative unions, theaters, music, schools of aesthetic education, art fairs, design, galleries, organization of exhibitions, concerts, festivals, etc.);
3. media industry (television, information distribution

platforms, radio), national film industry;

4. audiovisual market;
5. advertising activity;
6. protection of historical and cultural heritage (museum work, archival work, activities of reserves, export, import, and return of cultural values);
7. printed and electronic mass media, including social media and the Internet;
8. tourism and tourist activities;
9. resorts and recreational activities ;
10. state policy in the sphere of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations;
11. state policy in the field of development and use of the state language and languages of national minorities in Ukraine;
12. principles of charitable activity, including philanthropy;
13. state policy in the field of information and information security (except for issues related to the field of national security and defense);
14. coverage of the activities of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine;
15. state policy in the field of family and marital relations;
16. state policy of promoting the establishment of the family institution, providing state assistance to families with children, protecting homeless children, improving children's health and recreation;
17. demographic policy.

**The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine** is the central body of the executive power. Its activities

are directed and coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The Ministry ensures the development and implementation of state policy in the spheres of culture, state language policy, popularization of Ukraine to the world, and information security. It is also responsible for the state policy in the areas of restoration and preservation of national memory, international relations, religion and protection of the rights of national minorities in Ukraine; arts, cultural heritage protection, museum affairs, export, import, and return of cultural values; state policy in the spheres of information and publishing, television and radio broadcasting.

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine coordinates the work of numerous art and cultural institutions, among which national and regional theaters, circuses, musical and concert institutions, museums and reserves, centers of folk art, film studios, creative unions, and educational establishments (*See Institutions of the Sphere, 2022*). The structure of the Ministry also includes **the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience**, which implements state policy in the field of international relations, religion, and the protection of the rights of national minorities in Ukraine (*State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, 2022*).

**The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine** shapes the policy in the information and publishing spheres; provides analysis and forecasting of

trends in the development of the Ukrainian information space, on the market of printed, television and radio products; and exercises the powers of a shareholder of Public Broadcasting, in accordance with the Law "On Public Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine" (*State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, n.d.*).

**The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory** organizes work and develops policy in the field of restoration and preservation of national memory. It is also coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine through the Minister of Culture and Information Policy. The main tasks of the Institute are: to increase public attention to the history of Ukraine, providing a comprehensive study of the stages of the struggle for the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in the 20th century, and to implement measures to perpetuate the memory of participants in the national liberation struggle, victims of Holodomors (famines) and political repressions (*Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, 2022*).

**The State Agency of Ukraine on Arts and Art Education** (State Arts Agency) implements state policy in the field of arts and specialized art education, and submits state policy proposals to the Minister (*State Arts Agency, n.d.*).

Functions of **the Ukrainian Book Institute**, that works within the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy since 2016 include: financing of translations from/to the

Ukrainian language; implementation of state programs related to popularization and support of reading, Ukrainian book publishing and libraries; organization and holding of contests for publication at state expense of previously unprinted books; implementation of residency programs for artists; initiating research on the publishing industry in Ukraine, development forecast support of Ukrainian and foreign publishing houses that deal with Ukrainian-language books; development and organization of events to support Ukrainian book publishing; establishment of communication between subjects of the publishing business; cooperation with mass media (*Ukrainian Book Institute Strategy, n.d.*).

**The Ukrainian State Institute of Cultural Heritage** is a cultural and educational center which aim is to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of Ukraine, to increase the interest of the public in the cultural heritage, as well as to achieve a balance between the historical and cultural environment on the one hand, and new architectural embodiments, on the other. The Institute was established in 1995 and now works on seeking practical solutions to problems related to the research and protection of monuments, the development of normative documents for preservation and creation of appropriate conditions for the use of cultural heritage objects etc. (Ukrainian State Institute of Cultural Heritage, 2020). Another subordinated to the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine research organization is **the Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research** (*Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research, n.d.*).

25 institutions of art education belong to the sphere of management of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine (*Institutions of the Sphere, 2022*). The network of special art schools (music, choreographic, art, choral, etc.) consists of 1256 institutions, among which 250 schools in rural areas. The number of students constitutes 304 701 (including 31 732 in rural areas) (*Culture Policies and Trends, Ukraine, 2017*).

As authors of the “Ukrainian Cultural Actors Mapping and Needs Assessment” correctly summarize in their research, the creation of **the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation** (UCF) in 2017 was a milestone event for the sector. It was the first high-level state institution that allowed for an equalized access to funds for state and independent cultural organizations and withdrew the funds’ distribution function from the Ministry (Karnaukh & Kravchuk, 2022, p. 14). Today the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation supports projects through a competitive selection process in order to facilitate the development of the Ukrainian culture and creativity ecosystem; to enable the creation and dissemination of new senses and common values in society, as well as to contribute to the development of Ukrainian culture and preservation of cultural heritage in the context of global trends.

Priorities of UCF activities are:

1. To shape favorable conditions for creative activities, partnership development, and formation of common values in the Ukrainian civil society;



2. To promote intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity;
3. To guarantee cultural rights by ensuring equal access to cultural resources and equal opportunities for personal development and self-expression for all citizens and communities, regardless of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, regional, social, gender, and other peculiarities or differences;
4. To ensure the comprehensive development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life on the territory of Ukraine, as well as promote studying Ukrainian language abroad;
5. To promote internationalization of the Ukrainian culture, as well as coordination of the donor support to the projects related to culture and creative industries;
6. To support creation of competitive innovative cultural product and professional development of artists, as well as development of children's and youth creativity;
7. To promote projects aimed at local development under the conditions of decentralization;
8. To promote preservation and actualization of cultural heritage;
9. To support research and analytics related to culture and creative industries;
10. To promote development of educational initiatives, implementation of innovations and digitization of culture (*Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, 2022*).

The webpage of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, together with its web platform "Ukraine. Culture. Creativity", provide accurate and important updates

on the statistics of projects supported by UCF, help find Ukrainian partners among cultural NGOs and institutions, map Ukrainian cultural object losses during full-scale Russian war (more than 550 objects destroyed by December 2022), and follow important cultural events (*Ukraine. Culture. Creativity, 2022*).

Ukrainian culture sectors supported by the UCF include: audiovisual art (cinema, television, video art, digital art, new media, video games, widgets); cultural and creative industries (festivals and events, cultural and creative spaces, creative entrepreneurship, innovations); performative and stage art (theater, ballet, dance, circus, musical performances (musical, opera), performance, happening); visual art (painting, graphics, mosaic, print, installation, poster, lithography, muralism, street art, land art, sculpture, photography, public art); cultural heritage (libraries, museum affairs, archives, crafts, tangible and intangible cultural heritage); literature and publishing (books, periodicals, magazines, print media, literary festivals); audio art (live/reproduced music, sound art, radio).

**The Ukrainian Institute** is another important organization that strengthens Ukraine internationally and domestically, using the tools of cultural diplomacy. Being in the structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the Institute is very active in Ukraine internationally, and developing cultural relations between Ukraine and other countries. The Institute disseminates knowledge about

Ukraine in foreign societies, involves a wide range of citizens of other countries in discussion and dialogue, provides for the visibility of the country in the media, and offers Ukrainian narratives about Ukraine. By involving the sphere of culture in international cooperation, the Institute develops the competencies and capabilities of its participants, which improves the quality and effectiveness of Ukraine's representation in the world. The Institute's programs strengthen Ukraine's role in international cultural dialogue and exchange, as well as ensure Ukraine's permanent presence in the key global cultural, scientific, educational, and political platforms (*Ukrainian Institute, 2023*). Its programs and projects include films, music, visual arts, literature, performing arts, academic programs, research and analytics, cultural diplomacy and Ukrainian language promotion (*Ukrainian Institute, 2023*).

According to the Decentralization Reform that started in 2014, local municipal authorities received significant power and resources. In the field of culture, regarding managing of cultural facilities, the reform recommends the distribution of powers between various levels of government. The purview of the central government includes all the above-mentioned organizations, institutes and higher education establishments in the field of culture; the regional level includes concert and theater institutions, libraries, art palaces, etc.; the local level manages multifunctional culture centers. The reform passport has already codified the need for high-quality

cultural services for the population. And although the passport detailed the implementation plan for 2017-2020, the reform was launched in full only in 2019 and was seriously impeded by the war. As the CEDOS (Center for Society Research, think tank) analyst and manager Yulia Nazarenko summarizes, the goals of the reform include: adopting the minimum standards for providing citizens with culture services, reforming the financial support of the system of cultural service provision, modernizing the existing infrastructure, creating the conditions for skilled staff provision, developing the monitoring and quality assessment of cultural service provision (Nazarenko & CEDOS, n.d.). The risks and potential problems of the reform include lack of funding, staff shortages, war caused destruction, but at the same time, decentralization increased the role of local culture in the life of each community. Local culture is perceived as a valuable asset of the community, as opportunities for the development of traditions, tourism, crafts, and therefore its economy.

**The Decentralization Reform together with the funding support from the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation and EU grant programs led to the growing sector of Ukrainian Non-**

**Governmental organizations that work in the sphere of culture – independent theaters, festivals, audio and video production studios, digital initiatives. Despite the active war, the concentration of digital cultural production and the platforming of culture is booming in and around Ukraine.**

Within a number of surveys, based on media and expert analysis and field work, Ukraine tries to re-conceptualize the understanding of cultural heritage digitization in Ukraine and others affected by war zones; demonstrate how digitization supports cultural diversity and preserves cultures that are under threat; and how well constructed digital environment can become a public space and aid creative freedom even during the war.

Currently, every fifth publishing house in Ukraine has its storages and offices damaged by shelling. The urgent question is how to print new books, if the electricity is turned on only for a few hours a day, and several of the largest publishing houses have been destroyed by Russian missiles. But once again, we are observing how quickly

the book market adapts to force majeure circumstances and sales of Ukrainian books increase. First, in March 2022, sales fell by 95%, but in September-October, the majority of publishers have already announced their 2021 earnings. During the first four months of the full-scale war, Ukrainian publishing houses produced at least 270 novelties. And then things got even more lively: in the monthly selection of novelties published by the Ukrainian Book Institute, each time there are about 100 books (Honcharenko, 2022).

According to the results of the Ukrainian Book Institute study, the most popular genres for adults are classics (20%) and detective stories (18%), romance novels (16%), books on psychology and self-help, as well as science fiction and fantasy and modern novels (15% each). 8% of adults and 13% of children read books daily; in 2020, 34% of Ukrainians bought a printed book at least once; women read more often than men, 7% of men and 9% of women read every day (Ukrainian Book Institute, 2021). From 2015 to 2017, the number of theater visitors in Ukraine also increased by 10.7% - from 5.6 million to 6.2 million people. In 2017, 15 people out of 100 went to the theater (Zaxid. Culture, 2019).

Analyzing the Ukrainian cultural sector during the war, Anna Karnaukh and Kateryna Kravchuk identify key challenges and opportunities for each of its leading sectors. Key challenges for Ukrainian creative industries include broken supply and demand chains; job loss;

unfavorable working conditions for those creative professionals who continue to work, and brain drain. On the contrary, key opportunities are: increased demand for creative products from Ukraine; powerful horizontal initiatives and the self-organization of creative workers. For the sector of cultural heritage, the main challenges are the loss of the cultural assets and cultural heritage of Ukraine; real threat to the preservation of the national cultural heritage of Ukraine and its cultural values; illegal, violent and unjust actions of the Russian occupiers in relation to the cultural heritage of Ukraine and its cultural values. The opportunities are: development of the scientific and technical potential of Ukrainian professionals in the domain of cultural heritage preservation; development of new restoration technologies; setting up a single digital registry for movable heritage. The problem is that no single informational resource on Ukrainian culture, including cultural heritage, exists and no centralized digital registry for museum objects, heritage, printed and handwritten materials has been formed so far (Karnaukh & Kravchuk, 2022, pp. 17-18).

**According to the data provided by the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Finance, Taxation, and Customs Policy in Ukraine, before the war (2018), the culture and creative industries sector was estimated as**

**4% of GDP, with the entire creative economy being 7.5 % of GDP; 0.35 million people were working in the sphere with the number of jobs constantly growing**

*(Committee on Finance, Taxation, and Customs Policy in Ukraine, 2022).*

Among the main problems of the Ukrainian culture and creative industries sector, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy mentions the following in the Recovery Plan of Ukraine:

1. 37% of workers in the creative industries have lost their jobs or have been unpaid during the war;
2. 39% of creative businesses note a decrease/disappearance of orders and sales;
3. In a quarter of the creative businesses, the drop in turnover is more than 90%;
4. 20% of representatives of creative industries fled Ukraine because of the war, and now stay abroad (Recovery Plan of Ukraine, 2022).

The implementation of the Recovery Plan is supposed to ensure the preservation and development of jobs in the field of creative industries (by the end of 2022 – 220 thousand officially employed, by the end of 2025 – 380

thousand, by the end of 2032 – 600 thousand officially employed). But at the same time, the ongoing war, the destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and the need to supply Ukrainian Armed Forces, internal refugees, and vital industry and service sectors lead to the shortages of the budget on culture.

**The 2022 Ukrainian budget for culture, creative industries and information policy was UAH 14.5 billion. Most of the money was transferred to cover the needs of the Ukrainian Armed Forces after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine.**

These were urgent needs that helped back up the Army and literally save the country, but the lack of money in the budget created many problems for cultural institutions that are very dependent on state funding. Many of them had to relocate and/or suspend activity, many people involved in the creative industries lost their income, housing, and even lives.

In the State Budget of Ukraine for 2023, only UAH 4.3 billion is provided from general and special funds for financing

of culture (more than 3 times less than planned in 2022). The main areas of funding in 2023 are: daily operation of theaters, concert organizations, circuses (UAH 2.1 billion); functioning of museums, nature reserves, libraries (UAH 1.5 billion); implementation of projects by the Ukrainian Cultural Fund (UAH 154 million); support and development of book publishing and popularization of Ukrainian literature in the world (UAH 74 million). In total, 8 theaters, 9 circuses, 14 art groups and concert organizations, 16 museums, 8 libraries and 23 nature reserves are financed from the state budget (Budget-2023, 2023).

The Ukrainian cultural and creative sector has always been and will remain an important part of common European culture. Using this opportunity, we would like to thank governments and people, national and supranational organizations, big granting institutions and small non-governmental teams for their continued support to Ukraine, Ukrainian people and preservation of our culture in the times of war. We see joint creative projects, research, development of international networks as the main perspective of the post-war recovery of Ukraine and also as the main guarantee of a stronger and better future in our European home and the world.

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# THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESSES OF SOCIETY

## A25 CULTURAL FOUNDATION

In less than 10 years, Bulgaria has experienced two refugee crises – one resulting from the war in Syria in 2013 and the other from the war launched by Russia in Ukraine in 2022. Typical of both was that most of the foreign nationals who entered the country subsequently left and settled elsewhere. This phenomenon provoked numerous comical and ironic comments, but also highlighted the need for profound reforms towards a peaceful and prosperous coexistence between refugees seeking and finding asylum in Bulgaria, and the host society.

Nevertheless, with the influx of people from Ukraine, Bulgarian citizens demonstrated that they were more willing to respond than in the 2013-2019 crisis when the refugees were of Arab origin. Whether as a matter of personal conviction or a sense of closeness to Ukrainians, this time citizens rallied into volunteer groups, formal and informal centres to collect aid and provide logistical, social, housing, financial and health assistance. The cultural sector, with its various cultural institutions (state and municipal), independent

cultural organizations (NGOs), freelance artists, foreign cultural institutes, private companies in the field of culture, and community centres, actively joined the initiative.

Some of the measures proposed to varying degrees by sector representatives were as follows:

- **Free tickets for Ukrainian citizens, including children** (such tickets were provided by the “Electric Orpheus” 2022 Festival, Plovdiv; the Regional Museum of History in Veliko Tarnovo; the State Opera in Burgas; the State Opera and State Puppet Theatre in Stara Zagora; the Dobrich Puppet Theatre; the Municipal Puppet Theatre in Blagoevgrad and many others);
- **Special events where Ukrainian works were added to the cultural programme** (audio-tales for children in Ukrainian by “FOX book café”, Sofia; a UNICEF-published book of fairy tales by Ukrainian children; the “Ukrainian World of Maria Primachenko” exhibition hosted by the Cultural Centre in Harmanli with the support of the Polish Institute in Bulgaria; the exhibition of Vlada Ralko at the Czech

Centre in Sofia);

- **Translation to/from Ukrainian at several such events;**
- **Invitations extended to Ukrainian artists to participate in projects and various forums in Bulgaria** (e.g. theatre master classes at "Karakashyan" Studio, Sofia);
- **Permanent jobs for Ukrainian artists in Bulgarian cultural organizations and troupes** (among them the "Zhar" Theatre Troupe, Sofia; New Boyana Film, Sofia; "Screen Box" Studio, Sofia; "All in" Studio, Sofia; "Toplocentrala" Regional Centre for Contemporary Art, Sofia, etc.);
- **Temporary accommodation in the offices of the respective organisations** (e.g. at the Derida Stage);
- **Participation of Ukrainian citizens (professionals and amateurs, incl. children)** in festival and concert programmes (artists, amateurs and/or children were invited to the "Antistatic" Festival, Sofia; The "RADAR" Festival Beyond Music, Varna; the "Dreams of the Children from Ukraine" Exhibition in Burgas, etc.);
- **Creative workshops and open stages for children and adults** (this was the most common measure offered by: "TAM" space with "My Fairytale Superhero", Veliko Tarnovo; the "Let's Create the World of Music Together" Workshop by "Venera Music", Veliko Tarnovo; the "Clean Sky" Children's Centre for Children from Ukraine with the support of the Nativity of Christ Evangelical Methodist Church, Veliko Tarnovo; the "Magic of Cyanotype" by Goethe Institute-Bulgaria and photographers Ivan Donchev, Boriana Pandova and Mihail Novakov and dozens of other colleagues)
- **Charity campaigns**, as well as donation of the proceeds

from the regular cultural programme (such was the case of "The Smarts", Sofia; Stara Zagora "4 UA"; the "Easter Together" Initiative, Sofia; the "Shelter for the Unaccompanied" performance at the Toplocentrala Regional Centre for Contemporary Arts, Sofia; the State Opera and the Drama Theatre in Varna; the "Voice of Peace" charity concert, Burgas; the "Lyuben Karavelov 1897" Community Centre, Kurtovo Konare)

- **Ukrainians also turned into objects of art** in photography and video exhibitions, into performance characters, etc. (this took place during: a shared dinner at the "Re-Bonekrs" culture space, Varna; a screening of the film "If Peace were Food?" at MOVE.BG, Sofia; the "Letter to Plovdiv" Exhibition, Plovdiv; the "Migratory Birds" project at "Storycatchers", Sofia; the series of shared dinners by "Meeting Points", Sofia; the "Year of Ukrainian Culture and People" at the National Student House in Sofia, etc.).
- **The current war, as well as war and art in general, became a significant theme** in the arts (the "Reading Sofia" Foundation devoted the June 2023 Literary Talks entirely to the topic, the Ukrainian poet Anna Bagryana spoke about the existence of art during the war in Ukraine; the war in Ukraine, but also the topic of refugees from areas at war was thematized as in the form of testimonies and journalistic accounts, works by Ukrainian authors were presented. "Sfumato" Theatre Laboratory dedicated its Small Season in 2023 to the topic of "War and Peace", "Tochitsa" Publishing House published a children's book and held a series of Philosophical Breakfasts with children on the same topic. In the meantime, the 36 Monkeys



Contemporary Alternative Art and Culture Organisation staged “Dead Souls” (directed by Gergana Dimitrova) as an exploration of the soul in wartime).

***The above participants comprise only a small portion of those who harnessed their professional resources to support the Ukrainian community – they serve to illustrate the efforts of the cultural sector in enabling Ukrainian citizens who have sought protection in Bulgaria to feel some comfort and stability.***

Their initiatives have strong merits that should be underscored. The first is that they involve both adults and children; given the profile of arriving Ukrainians and the high percentage of children among them, involving the latter in the cultural life of the country at the earliest possible stage is fundamental for achieving an integrated and stable host society. Children are a key factor of successful integration, and cultural organisations have shown that they strongly believe in the accuracy of this statement.

The measures were also aimed **not only at professional artists but also at amateurs**. This approach avoided the isolation and division among foreigners based on professional profile, and also enabled professional artists to continue their work in this very specific sector. There are numerous examples of Ukrainians being invited to participate in professional and amateur formats, both in Sofia and in the country.

The cultural sector supported integration processes by offering **both temporary emergency measures and long-term solutions**. These were, on the one hand, the immediate accommodation of Ukrainians in the offices of organisations, the adapting of premises into logistics centres for humanitarian aid, but also making these premises available to those in need for rehearsals or work, as, for example, was the case with „Derida Stage“. On the other hand, some organizations offered permanent jobs to foreigners, inviting artists seeking protection in Bulgaria to join artistic troupes.

**It is important to note that the number of foreigners who remained in the sector is negligible, as the level of pay is often lower than in the service or construction sectors and does not realistically allow one to start a new life. However, this fact does not diminish or invalidate the aid offered, but serves as reference to our national priorities and a regressive political vision of culture.**

After the onset of the war, the national calendar of cultural events included many in which Ukrainian citizens and Ukraine in general were the 'protagonists' of what was happening (video exhibitions, documentary theatre, documentary films, theatre performances, etc.). Beyond the indisputable benefits of providing contact with cultural content, these projects had the very important effect of **raising awareness** about Ukrainian refugees, about their lives which they had to start all over again, about the consequences of war. The situation had changed and while eyewitnesses of the previous war in Europe were still alive, the next one had begun, and artists from various arts in the country did not hesitate to alert the public of this fact. They challenged the audience's emotions, reason and imagination with their work and bravely revealed those aspects that are most relevant and painful in our day, in the same way that arts and artists have historically done – commenting on what others would or could not. In the larger debate about the role of culture and arts in times of crisis, the Bulgarian cultural sector took an adequate, contemporary stance.

Despite the traditional concentration of cultural organizations and events in Sofia, it should be noted that support for foreign citizens was also offered by colleagues from other cities, including V. Tarnovo, Varna, Dobrich, Stara Zagora, Burgas, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Kurtovo Konare, Ruse, etc. There, and in other places in the country, charity campaigns were organized for the refugees, with donations from ticket sales, free tickets for perfor-

mances, exhibitions and concerts; Ukrainian artists were invited to participate in local events, etc. Thus, despite the concentration of cultural life and cultural operators in Sofia, a considerable response and opportunities were offered in other larger cities across the country. This is an **example of the decentralisation** that the cultural sector has been fighting for on a much larger scale since the early 1990s. No such phenomenon was observed during the previous refugee flow of Arab nationals.

The measures implemented by the cultural sector took place not only in different places but also in different artistic fields. Alongside free performances for Ukrainian children in dozens of puppet theatres across the country, the Sofia Opera and Ballet presented a portion of its children's programme in Ukrainian and combined its efforts with those of the "Balkansky" circus troupe to introduce Ukrainian children to the charming Shrek from the eponymous play. The "Cu29" Gallery of Contemporary Art in Plovdiv hosted an audio-visual exhibition of refugee narratives entitled "Letter to Plovdivites", based on an idea by Boris Zafirov, and "RADAR" Festival Beyond Music concluded its 10th anniversary event with sets by Berlin-based but Ukrainian-rooted Kateryna Zavoloka, a.k.a. Zavoloka. UNICEF published a book of fairy tales written by Ukrainian refugee children living in Bulgaria, while "Karakashyan" Studio offered master classes in theatre with free admission for Ukrainians. Such diversity is of great value because it allows for different types of encounters with art, for multiple approaches and messages, and develops different skill sets. It should

therefore be noted as good practice and encouraged in future integration policies.

**Both civil society organisations and cultural institutions** took part in the initiatives of support to Ukrainians (in addition to volunteering in their personal capacity), taking the position of both host and supporter; and their willingness to act according to their capacities and capabilities placed them on the same side of the 'barrier'. Given their financing, their internal culture-making politics and their different aesthetic views, such consensus and synergy are rare in the sector and therefore deserves special attention, in the hope that it may become routine.

Alongside the horror it has brought, the war in Ukraine and the influx of people seeking asylum in our country have actually intensified **interest and cultural contacts between Bulgaria and Ukraine**. The Bulgarian cultural sector turned its gaze to Ukrainian culture and in a short time works by Ukrainian artists appeared on Bulgarian stage, and Ukrainian artefacts in galleries and museums. The "Creative Europe" programme channelled €5 million to support Ukrainian artists and cultural heritage, and some of the competitions allocating these funds are international and involve EU partners, incl. Bulgaria. These opportunities are expected to enrich cultural exchange and cooperation between our two countries in the long term.

Alongside the positive examples, which we hope time and the sector will multiply, there have also been numer-

ous missed opportunities. Among the 48 regional, community, university and special libraries, over 186 historical, ethnographic, archaeological museums and art galleries, 72 drama, opera, operetta and puppet, drama-puppet theatres<sup>1</sup>, Ukrainian refugees were in fact invited to very few places as audience. The number of regional libraries that organised Ukrainian Literature Weeks or presented Ukrainian authors to their readers was regrettably very low; among the exceptions were the Sofia Library and the Varna Regional Library, which introduced a "Ukrainian Bookshelf" following donations from the Ukrainian Embassy and as part of the eponymous global action of the Ukrainian state, implemented in Turkey, Lithuania, Austria, South Korea and 16 other countries in and outside Europe. Within the information flow of cultural events for 2022 and 2023, there was no substantial information about museums and galleries that had pulled Ukrainian art from their vaults, invited Ukrainian artists, or told stories about Bulgaria's cultural ties with the Ukrainian people. A few exceptions which deserve mention are the Ethnocuisine initiative of the Regional Museum of History in Burgas, with the participation of Zhanna Shubina and Alexandra Sidorova, the exhibitions of Voldemir Storozum in Burgas and Daria Pugachova in Plovdiv, as well as the Contemporary Ukrainian Painting exhibition, which opened in the Nova Zagora Art Gallery. It is an interesting fact that the "Rusi Karabiberov" Gallery has in its collection over one

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<sup>1</sup> The data listed has been obtained from the National Statistical Institute for 2022 and are available at: <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3657/%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8>

hundred and fifty works – paintings and graphics – by seventy-one Ukrainian artists. In February 2023 the City Art Gallery in Varna opened its doors to young Ukrainian refugee artists. The exhibition was a charity event, initiated by the “Open Heart” Foundation, and is yet another example of the importance of partnerships and resource sharing between cultural institutions and independent civil society organizations. In addition to these missed opportunities, the majority of the 227 big screens in the country failed to show Ukrainian films or films with Ukrainian actors. This does not include the House of Cinema, which showed “Firebird” and brought Ukrainian actor Oleg Zagorodnii to Sofia, or the city of Plovdiv, which screened the Golden Lion-nominated Ukrainian film “Reflection” as part of the “Sofia Film Fest” programme in the city. At the moment, only a few theatrical stages in the country show work from Ukraine – examples are “The Hague” at the “Ivan Vazov” National Theatre by Sasha Denisova (directed by Galin Stoev) and “A Very Simple Story” by Maria Lado (directed by Borislav Chakrinov at the “Adriana Budevskia” Drama Theatre in Burgas).

Reprogramming the calendar of a cultural institution takes time, and probably approval on several levels; it certainly requires financial resources, but it also requires a willingness and a conviction that the purpose of art is not just to entertain, but to bring together and inform, as well as to draw the audience’s attention to world issues and cataclysms. It was therefore important that, since the country had such a substantial resource of spaces and

guaranteed annual public funding for them, that these spaces offered as much cultural information as possible to the newly arrived citizens who needed to be integrated in society. After almost two years since the beginning of the war, there is little evidence that these cultural institutions have tangibly enriched their programming with more intercultural content – not just Ukrainian content, but content that emphasizes the richness of cultures as a whole. Content that offers encounters with different cultures inevitably nurtures in its audience the reflex not only for appreciation, but for inspiration and enrichment from mutual communication. This attitude is vital at a time when the world warns of the next migration crisis.

In the context of public funding and institutional action, it is noteworthy that two of the largest cultural funds in the country – the National Culture Fund and the Culture Programme of Sofia Municipality – acknowledged Ukrainian citizens as a target group in the project activities of applicant organisations and approved funding for dozens of refugee-focused projects. Unfortunately, this focus only occurred once in 2022.

### **(Un)sustainability and unfulfilled integration intentions**

After the initial shock of the war passed, the situation seemed to change. According to UNICEF data, between February 2022 and May 31, 2023, 159 540 people applied for asylum in Bulgaria, of whom 53 811 remain in the coun-

try today, i.e. less than 34%<sup>2</sup>. All others have left Bulgaria. This is a sad finding given that the war is not yet over. It seems that our country cannot serve as a long-term refuge for people fleeing bombs because of its financial, social, health, educational and other factors, which seem to have provoked the refugees' decision to leave.

The cultural sector's activities in support of Ukrainian citizens have also declined, probably because of the same outflow. Still, the concentration of efforts, resources and energy that nevertheless occurred should draw our attention to several factors that could help Bulgarian society in its quest for integration, sustainability, development and equity with the rest of Europe, and encourage it to be bolder in its expectations of quality of life. Such upheavals show that faith in the good and hope for the future are strong motives for doing good on a personal level, but are not enough; and that one-off initiatives cannot replace systematic efforts in ensuring that both the host society and the foreigners in it live together in understanding and similar values.

Culture plays a major role in the process towards creating such a society. In an interview with Uspelite.bg, in 2020, in response to the invitation to overturn Maslow's pyramid, Dr. Neli Stoeva noted: 'Culture is not only among the top needs of a society in a difficult economic situation, but is indeed a fundamental need. It sets the meanings, the

values, the alternatives for the future. Economy always comes second!' Continuing Dr. Stoeva's line of thinking, we can say that culture, with its values, knowledge, beliefs and worldview, governs the individual and societal responses of people and communities, determining how they deal with various challenges.

**This is why in contemporary political discourse culture is no longer spoken of as a separate sphere, but as a phenomenon that is organically linked to other spheres of life and to personal and social behaviour.**

It is the primordial soup from which our reactions and behaviour are born, especially in cases of emergency.

Two years have passed, but the consequences of the previous major crisis are still evident. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 demonstrated that culture is able to make people more resilient to the challenging days in isolation, the intense communication campaigns, the financial hardships and mental burden. In that period, we saw inspiring videos of world-renowned artists who "donated" their talents to the people sitting at home in front of their screens; others employed their professionalism in spreading important information to a wider audience in

<sup>2</sup> Only 8362 of them were put up on hotels and state-owned facilities.

an accessible and entertaining way; still others opened, albeit virtually, the doors of their homes in order to shift loneliness from the minds of their audiences. Cultural institutions from around the world shared portions of their archives, welcoming even the remotest of viewers. Thus, at a time when millions of people were isolated from friends and family, culture brought them together and kept them close, providing the necessary dose of comfort, inspiration and a sense of belonging. And while the sector itself fell into crisis, it aided significantly in handling the global one.

The debate on the role of culture in times of crisis is multilayered and probably never-ending, but there are several factors in the Bulgarian context that need to be addressed, because their state, both now and in the future, will determine how challenges, regardless of their nature, are met and dealt with. These factors are in fact the elements of a network of stakeholders in the process towards an integrated society. We examine them in the past tense, but full of expectation and faith in their untapped potential.

### Financial sustainability

As already mentioned, cultural organisations did whatever they could for Ukrainian citizens, providing accommodation, jobs, free tickets, charity events, Ukrainian content, etc. However, what the CSOs among them specifically lacked was emergency financial resources that

could be used for the long term. This was also the big threat during the COVID-crisis, when the delay of a single monthly payment suspended the activity of some organisations and even led to the bankruptcy of others. Financial instability in the civil sector, including among freelance colleagues, is so great, that some sector members operate with a horizon of up to two monthly payments. For the most part, organisations do not have reserve financial resources to guarantee stability in the event of crisis and to ensure operation if, due to an emergency, they fail to receive payment within 3-6 months. A good practice in addressing this weakness in 2021 was the National Culture Fund's Recovery and Development programme, later reinforced by the One-Year Grant, which allowed organisations to receive medium-term support for their own teams; unfortunately, the programme was discontinued.

### State policy

2024 will be the tenth consecutive year of zero integration policy in the country. One of the reasons for this is that a second strategic document in the field of refugees, after the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2015-2020), failed to receive the support of an action plan and national funding. Thus, the new National Strategy on Migration (2021 – 2025) remains stillborn. It is accompanied by a 2022 Priority Implementation Plan and an April 2021 – June 2022 Implementation Report, but the integration intentions and outcomes in both are too

fragile and unsupported by data. For example: 'During the procedure for granting international protection, the SAR under the Council of Ministers supported foreigners accommodated in the territorial units of the Agency **through a set of measures** for initial social adaptation, including awareness-raising campaigns, socio-cultural events, enrolment in Bulgarian language courses, etc.'. How exactly were they "supported" – financially and/or logistically; where were the "measures" implemented – number of places and respondents reached, children or adults; when exactly were they implemented; what period did they cover, what were the topics of the awareness campaigns and socio-cultural events, how many of them were held – these are questions whose answers would provide useful data for a successful monitoring exercise with subsequent recommendations and strategic decisions based on research rather than intentions.

### Municipality and municipal administration

Another big factor on the road to a stable integrated society is the municipality. [The Sofia Urban Integration Audit](#), performed in October 2018 by Denitsa Lozanova, Sevdalina Voynova, Snezhina Gabova, contains the very important conclusion that 'Sofia does not have a ready strategy for the integration of third-country nationals and the provision of relevant services, partly because of the centralized model of migration and integration management at national level.' Most localities do not have a plan on how to use urban space so as to allocate more spac-

es for community activities. Many have only a formal, well-detailed but otherwise dysfunctional mechanism for greater citizen participation in local decision-making, and absolutely none to involve foreigners who have settled in the area. Instead, protected spaces to support those in need are created by the NGO sector, informal groups of citizens and volunteers. Another important role of the municipal administration is to create and promote narratives (i.e. positive accounts) of the integrated society in order to inform and educate about its benefits. The municipalities themselves could organise campaigns, commission research based on data on the integration factor, request mapping of the communities living in the territory, with the aim of keeping local leaders, as well as administrative staff, well informed of the intercultural situation of their city. The municipality can be proactive and consult with other stakeholders on their activities in the territory and obtain and process the data from such research. An integrated society cannot exist if the municipal administration does not work in cooperation with the police, educational institutions, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations in its territory. Of equal importance is the creation of a database of cultural mediators who can respond to the needs of the municipality in its work with foreigners. This applies to all municipalities in the country, as does another feature captured by the Audit team: "conservative public attitudes towards foreigners and migrants, ranging from positive apathy to open racism".

## School and education

It is impossible to coexist with a community the stereotypes for which you have created yourself. A manifestation of this sad observation was the painful November day of this year, when cultural mediator and translator Hamid Hossiyar was assailed in Harmanli. A further example are the dozens of incidents of attacks on cars with Ukrainian registration in Varna. The lack of multicultural thinking, the failure to adopt cultural diversity as a value, including the lack of human curiosity about differences, is evident, however, not only among adults, but even at school level. Education and school life must therefore be highlighted as the next step in our path towards an integrated society. Whether due to personal convictions, societal pressures, or a weak professional development system, the majority of Bulgarian schools currently do not employ people trained in basic intercultural competences, or at least in the promotion of cultural difference as a value. It would be a huge positive change if we ever see intercultural dialogue classes in the school curriculum (meetings with foreigners; language weeks; culture and dance weeks; games, songs, and food of cultures, etc.), or if we see school interiors representing different ethnicities. This would turn the Bulgarian school into a source of messages that together we are stronger, that values and the future can be shared and this is nothing to be scared of.

## Media

In addition to education, media also plays an important role in sending messages to society and in shaping our

outlook. They also have the power of shaping attitudes towards third-country nationals arriving in the country.

**Whether they choose to broadcast xenophobic material disguised as 'freedom of speech', to spread stereotypes, or to narrate positive stories and to promote the value of diverse cultures among the public is a question of ethics and regulations, which are not always undisputed.**

In both refugee waves since 2013, the lack of knowledge and education of some journalists covering migrant issues was evident in the media environment. Therefore, looking forward, we hope that civil society organisations, media editorial boards and professional associations will organise meetings between journalists and cultural, integration and refugee law experts, forums against hate speech, partnerships with organisations working on the ground; and will provide more international news.

The concept of intercultural cities also details the role of local administration, media, schools and dozens of other factors. This is a topic that the Council of Europe has start-



ed to address consistently since 2007, but which Bulgarian cities have not yet embraced. The Council of Europe has commissioned a group of experts to create a programme for implementing an intercultural integration model that responds to the needs arising from the growing cultural diversity in human settlements and by global migration flows. The report finds that poorly managed diversity leads to poverty and inequality, and proposes reassessment aimed at creativity and economic development. The team behind the concept identifies 16 elements that an urban intercultural strategy should contain. These include, in addition to municipalities (which we have already mentioned), education and media, participation of foreign cultures in the life of the host society, good neighbourliness, public services, mediation and conflict resolution, communication, intercultural intelligence and competence, leadership and citizenship, etc.

### Research models and data

In the amalgam of factors leading to an integrated society, we should also add science-based models of decision-making, not only in the drafting of strategies or large-scale processes and changes, but even in the organisation of cultural events. These are models based on data and analyses, which should serve as the foundation for integration activities, providing information on the profile of participants, their needs, current situation, place of residence, cultural, educational and religious specifics.

**A scientific approach increases the efficiency of integration work because it allows better knowledge of the target group and adequate addressing.**

or example, it would be inappropriate to offer vocational retraining courses in hairdressing and cookery to foreigners with a highly qualified professional profile (teachers, engineers, doctors, veterinary specialists, researchers, artists, etc.) seeking protection in Bulgaria. Highly religious people should not be offered films, books or performances that focus on the body, as these types of people are sensitive to the topic and this should not be ignored. Instead, events in the field of Bulgarian art history and cultural heritage would be a much more adequate initial presentation of our society. Eventually, when the distance is bridged, we will most certainly see foreigners at a variety of cultural events, including ones they find provocative, as trust in the host society will already have been achieved. A very good example of a scientific model applied to work with refugees was initiated years ago in Sweden. There, a mechanism was set up to track the integrity of refugees and those seeking protection, and in June 2023 Sweden published its first report – the result of monitoring and collecting corroborated data on the integration of refugee children into Swedish society. The Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education

Policy (IFAU), which is a government research institute, tracked the economic and social integration of children who arrived from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, covering 25 years of their life among the host society. The report provides an exceptional picture of Sweden's education system, which is decentralised and requires that refugee children commence school within a maximum of 3 weeks from arrival (with fewer classes at the start and the option for reimbursement of some of the costs related to school attendance by the municipality). Subsequently, the data shows that refugee girls who arrived in Sweden at or close to age 7 achieved, over the observation period, the economic status of those born in Sweden, and for the most part exceeded their earnings by 2.2%. Boys who emigrated at an early age also achieved equal economic standing, while those who settled in Sweden after the age of 12 had lower income compared to their Swedish-born peers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Currently about 2 million of Sweden's population were born elsewhere, that's practically one in 5 people in the country. As a result of increasing immigration, the state has introduced highly restrictive measures for obtaining refugee status and protection, including family reunification. Restrictions affect Muslim communities, the Sami and other minorities very strongly, and a very intense debate on the integration of immigrants in general has been ongoing since 2015. In its annual human rights report, Amnesty International, cited by Euractiv, sounded the alarm on social exclusion among minorities, and in 2022 the Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson noted, as quoted by Reuters: 'Segregation has been allowed to go so far that we have parallel societies in Sweden... Integration has been too poor at the same time as we have had a large immigration.'. Reuters. 28 April 2022. Swedish PM says integration of immigrants has failed, fuelling gang crime.

## Community centres

In the battle for trust between refugees and the new community in which they are trying to settle, the oldest community formations in the country – the community centres – could play a crucial role. In smaller settlements in particular, they serve as meeting places and places of authority and could bring different communities together, organise festivals or other cultural events showcasing and celebrating cultural differences, and also educational events between the two sides. If this was happening, perhaps we would not have places like the villages of Rozovo and Elin Pelin, or the town of Belene, where civil protests in 2014 and 2017 prevented the accommodation of Syrian refugees.

Integration has become a controversial global issue. Increasingly, countries will be exposed to migration, and a plan has long been needed to structure the relationship between refugees and asylum seekers on the one hand and the host society on the other. It is not only individual countries that are exposed to migration to varying degrees, but also the European community as a whole. According to the High Commissioner for Refugees, 108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced (as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, political reasons) at the end of 2022. Compared to 2021, this is an increase of 19 million. As a result of the war in Ukraine alone, 5.7 million Ukrainian citizens have left their country.

An integrated society is one that has and implements

mechanisms to combat xenophobia, racism, discrimination. It is a model for a healthier society, which requires the mobilisation of politicians, civil society organisations, businesses, citizens and the media. Achieving it is a slow and continuous process which requires consistent action by the host society and institutions. But most importantly, an integrated society cannot be achieved without government policy and political commitment, and without well-functioning institutions.

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# SHALL WE MEET UP?

ANALYTICAL REPORT FROM A SURVEY ON THE ATTITUDES OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES  
TOWARDS CULTURAL LIFE AND EVENTS IN BULGARIA

**DAVID KYURANOV**

## 1. Study methodology

The study on the attitudes towards cultural life of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria was conducted for the purposes of the A25 Cultural Foundation, within the framework of the "85 483" Project. It comprises the integral third section of the project, which aims to complement the other research perspectives – on the cultural life in Ukraine and the response of Bulgarian cultural institutions and organizations after the onset of the war. The aim of this part of the project was to identify the practices and attitudes of Ukrainian refugees towards cultural life in Bulgaria; within the research itself the focus went beyond this framework and addressed the topic of the integration of Bulgarian society, of which Ukrainians are a part, and how this integration can be supported through cultural projects.

Qualitative research methods – focus groups and in-depth interviews – were used for a comprehensive analysis of the refugee situation. Four in-depth interviews

were conducted with representatives of NGOs working to support refugees from Ukraine. These were the representatives of the "Arms Wide Open" Association, "For the Good" Integration Centre, the "It Depends on Us" Humanitarian Centre and Ukrainian Kosher.

Three focus group discussions with refugees from Ukraine were also held – two with adults and one with teenagers. Respondents for the focus groups were identified through the assistance of the aforementioned organizations.

## 2. What is integration

At first glance, it may seem unusual to start the report with this particular question. The work carried out in the course of the survey, however, and its results, reveal that this is central topic. Whatever the level of activity – be it at policy level or in the organisation of concerts by groups from other countries whose citizens live in Bulgaria – it is integration that is the outcome we should (and have the opportunity to) seek. Therefore, it is essential to be very clear as to what

we mean when we use the term “integration” – a word whose meaning in the country has been distorted towards the Roma community and is widely – in everyday, political, media and scientific speech – used completely wrongly.

**The word “integration” comes from the Latin adjective “integer”, which means “whole”, in the sense of “intact, whose structure/wholeness is not broken”, in simpler terms – something that has no cracks, it is not divided into parts.**

The phrase “the Roma should be integrated into Bulgarian society”, for example, makes no sense. You cannot integrate “to” something. If we want to make sense of integration, we should say, “Bulgarian society is (including ethnically) disintegrated and needs to integrate (become more whole, eliminate divisions).” Ethnic Bulgarians are as much a part of Bulgarian society and citizenship as ethnic Roma, Turks or other communities in our country. If we state that integration is necessary, we may say, “There are great divisions (cracks, fissures, chasms) between different groups – for example, ethnic groups – in Bulgarian society. Our society will develop more successfully if we make efforts to erase these gaps, to narrow them, or at least to build bridges between their banks.”

An excellent definition of the term in precisely the sense described above can be found on [the website](#) of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe: “Integration is a dynamic, multi-actor process of mutual engagement that facilitates effective participation by all members of a diverse society in economic, political, social and cultural life, and fosters a shared sense of belonging at national and local levels. **Weak or non-existent integration policies often contribute to instability by failing to adequately address the root causes of tensions.** Good integration policies can create a society in which everyone has a sense of belonging and of contributing no matter what their ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious background”

Ukrainian refugees in our country receive help from people who understand that such assistance is essential – non-governmental organizations (NGOs), institutions (to some extent, with the encouragement of NGOs), businesses, etc. Integration, however is a process that occurs in everyday life; we could say that there is good integration between Ukrainian refugees and the NGOs that support them, that these groups are well integrated with each other – that there is no prejudice, hatred, etc. between them. But this does not mean that Bulgarian society has integrated in relation to Ukrainians, i.e. that the gaps between Ukrainians and other groups have disappeared. These people are renting homes, looking for and starting jobs, travelling around the country, their children go to school – these are the very situations we

should observe if we want to assess how the integration process is developing.

**Why do we devote so much space to the concept of integration and its correct meaning (which is, in practice, the only meaningful meaning)? Because, as research has shown, future cultural policies, projects and initiatives would have the strongest and most meaningful effect if they are essentially integrative.**

## 2. Further clarifications

Another important interpersonal attitude that we encountered in this study was discrimination. The word originates from the Latin “discrimen, inis, f” – meaning “difference”, and within the humanities, politics and law has come to mean “exaggerating someone’s characteristics / differences”, meaning that when we discriminate against someone, we exaggerate their characteristics as a difference between us and them.

The difference is exaggerated to such extent that it is perceived as dominant in defining a person or group of people.

Have and are Ukrainian refugees currently discriminated against by Bulgaria as a state and by its citizens in personal contacts? Yes.

Have and are Ukrainian refugees belonging to vulnerable groups (mothers with several children, people with disabilities, etc.) discriminated against by Bulgarian institutions and citizens? Yes.

Have and are Ukrainian children currently discriminated against by Bulgarian institutions, teachers and classmates? Yes. Has anything been done to address these issues? We do not know. The reports of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which can be found on its website, for example, only cover the period up to 2020, although more recent ones should be available.

*“There are very few people who prefer to stay here. Those who would rather to be somewhere else in Europe simply leave. Germany, Belgium UK, France.” (in-depth interview, NGO)*

And this is perfectly understandable. The search for housing, jobs and enrolment in school, described below, are unlikely to have left a particularly good impression on families.

The ending of the above interview response is particularly interesting in view of the purpose of the study and the work of the A25 Cultural Foundation: *'Those who remain here are the people waiting for the war to end so they go home'* (In-depth interview (II), NGO). In this light, anyone working on policies or project design might well ask themselves, "Why should I develop special policies and activities for these people if they are only 'tourists' in our country?". A holistic view aimed at implementing integration policies in the Bulgarian society should look beyond the current project and beyond the presence of Ukrainians in Bulgaria. From an integration point of view, we should ask ourselves: "What can I do to help these people get warmer treatment, rather than popping their tires and ripping off their car license plates (real situations)? How can the presence of these people help me to move forward with my integration policies and projects?" And there is an easy answer: by learning to accept difference. This is why discrimination is so important. Although condemned by law, it is a well embedded mindset.

What does all this have to do with attitudes towards culture and cultural events of Ukrainian refugees? I have to admit that as a researcher I initially saw the study as a very limited task – we would learn more about the "cultural everyday life and habits" of Ukrainian refugees of different ages and types of settlement; we would learn more about how much cultural life they now have in Bulgaria and what that is like, and we would prepare a report on this, making recommendations for possible initiatives. The conversations

with the highly involved, both emotionally and operatively, NGO people, and especially with the Ukrainians themselves who accepted the invitation to meet and talk, completely changed my perspective on the issue.

The defining issue in the refugee narrative is that of the "encounter". All these refugees, young and old, are fleeing their country, which is under attack and being massively bombed. Bulgaria has not been at war since 9 September 1944. Several generations have grown up, and this will hopefully forever remain so, without any personal experience of what war is and what its daily life is like. Some of the Ukrainians in Bulgaria have relatives at the front, others have relatives and friends who have remained in Ukraine. Although traditionally slow to act and employing ill-conceived measures, the institutions at least did not reject them outright, and occasionally even pay attention to good NGO practices. Bulgarians receive Ukrainians in various ways – some with compassion, support and lack of prejudice, others with disapproval and reluctance, insults, sometimes even violence. It is important, of course, not to idealize the image of Ukrainians: *"...there are some of us who are very insolent and arrogant, but this also applies to Bulgarians"* (In-depth interview, NGO). Thus, the main thing is how the encounter between refugees and Bulgarian citizens occurs and how it could influence, through culture and art, their perception of each other. This is where we should add the last key element, related precisely to the encounter and the experience of the other – the need for a broader vision in the making of

cultural policies, projects and initiatives. And by “vision” we do not mean some obscure document tucked away in institutional cabinets and servers, but a holistic view. The problem is not “how to integrate Ukrainian refugees into Bulgarian society” – as noted above, this is a misuse of the word “integration”. Let us rephrase the problem this way: the Bulgarian society is highly disintegrated (meaning that there are serious divisions between different groups of people on a variety of grounds). For example, our society is ethnically disintegrated, or there are divisions along the Sofia-province axis, or no points of contact between poorer people and the few very rich people, etc. That is why I’m taking the liberty of using the survey as an occasion – in this particular case it is focused on Ukrainian refugees, but Ukrainians are just one of many groups divided among themselves. Ahead of the final recommendations, let me underscore: if we want to work for the integration of Bulgarian society – which is the main obstacle facing Ukrainian refugees as well – we should not think of “Ukrainian refugees”, “Ukrainian mothers and children”, “children from Syria and Afghanistan”. We should consider the common human characteristics: for example, the children in Bulgaria, the mothers in Bulgaria, the grandmothers, the fathers, etc.

### 3. Specifics of fieldwork

The fieldwork itself had certain limitations. First, the focus groups were conducted with the help of interpreters, which to some extent altered the dynamics of the

discussions and the direct contact with the moderator. However, we made sure that the interpreters were people the respondents knew and trusted, and it is safe to say that the respondents had no difficulty sharing. In the two discussions with adults, it was difficult to find people from the 25 – 50 group, as these were working and less able to spare the time. The focus group for younger people was intended to cover the 18 – 25 age range, but the organisation responsible for assembling the group was able to bring together predominantly teenagers. On the one hand, this offered a unique perspective on children<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the ethical approach to working with children requires that they should not be asked to relive the traumatic experiences of war or their escape from Ukraine, so these topics were not discussed.

### 4. Key findings

- It can be concluded that integration between the Bulgarian and Ukrainian groups has more or less not happened so far. The process did, however, take place between Ukrainians and the representatives of NGOs that support them on Bulgarian soil. However, contacts, especially those that could lead to meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> We clarify that using the word ‘children’ we are not referring to their maturity, nor are we questioning our confidence in their judgment, we are simply describing them with the legal concept of a ‘child’ under the Child Protection Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - a person under the age of 18.



“encounters” between people, are rather rare.

- Ukrainians are adequately supported by NGOs in all sorts of ways – activities and spaces for children, humanitarian aid, mostly at the beginning of the war, but even at the moment, assistance in navigating institutions or finding housing, organization of courses and all sorts of events, including Ukrainian dinners and festivals. However, the NGOs themselves – quite understandably, given their focus and reason for their existence – think in the direction of integration of Ukrainians into Bulgarian society. What is missing is thinking about integration “of” the Bulgarian society with its various groups, of which Ukrainians are already a part.
- Institutions either obstruct (laborious enrolment of children in school, of registration with a general practitioner) or hesitatingly act, but insufficiently to support a real integration process, which shows that they do not believe such process is necessary. Nor do they signal any understanding that integration is a process that should be recognised, structured and led by them.
- Bulgarians do not necessarily reject Ukrainians, some help, and some form friendships, but this are, in all likelihood, rare cases. Contacts occur thanks to NGOs, around which acquaintances are formed, with friends of people from the organization, for example. Sadly, there are also symptomatic cases of car tyres being slashed, number plates being hammered, bullying at school.
- The story of Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the war has been a story of the disintegration of life as people knew it. Families are breaking down, along with

everyday life and the system of habits that each person has, their homes are breaking down, sometimes literally, i.e. all of life’s tokens that bring peace, familiarity and security are under attack.

- Ukrainian culture has also come under the blows of war – the Russians are trying to appropriate personalities and artists, to plunder and export museum exhibits, to steal Ukraine’s identity. This shows the importance of including elements of traditional Ukrainian culture in the design of cultural events.
- A general conclusion regarding the needs of Ukrainian refugees in our country is that they like to attend cultural events and are open to them, especially when it comes to children’s events. However, such events are not a priority in their daily lives, focused on sorting out the basic elements of daily life such as work and childcare.
- In essence, there is no particular difference between cultural life in Sofia and in the major cities in Ukraine – theatres, concerts, operas, ballet (including for children), festivals, etc., which is also evident in the summary on the state of the cultural sphere in Ukraine. Here, such events are more difficult for Ukrainians to access because of budgetary constraints, but also especially in cases where there is a language barrier, for example in the case of theatres. NGOs do their best to provide access to theatres and concerts. Such events could be important as “normalising” events (see Recommendations).
- Organisations that support Ukrainian refugees try to offer all possible cultural events in Sofia – visits to museums, galleries, exhibitions, Bulgarian films, concerts, cartoons

for children, children`s theatre, workshops. They invite both young people and the elderly. However, NGOs do not have a budget for such activities and try to make the most of the opportunities for free events or to obtain a certain number of tickets from the organizers.

- NGOs also seek projects that aim to bring people together through cultural tools, such as the Oranta women`s club, which aims to provide women with the opportunity of meeting artists, participating in art workshops, and attending cultural events, museums and exhibitions.
- Teenagers are developing a taste for mass culture very similar to their Bulgarian peers through streaming platforms and series such as "The Mandalorian", "Full Metal Alchemist", "Sherlock", "House", "The Good Doctor".
- Children find excursions – to Vitosha, Sofia, Seven Rila Lakes, Plovdiv – particularly memorable. Such trips can be used to get more children from different groups to joint and participate in various local traditions.
- It is important to note, with a view to further action, that the largest Facebook group for helping Ukrainian refugees, [Допомога українським біженцям](#), created by Yuliana Kulyukina, has 92,000 members and can be an excellent channel for getting people involved.
- The combined efforts of NGOs and the relatives with whom the Ukrainian children have arrived are bearing fruit to the extent that they talk, think and share just like their peers from any other European country.

## 5. Recommendations

Ukrainian refugees should not be seen as an isolated ethnic and cultural group, "opposed" only to the Bulgarian majority. A more successful strategy would be to use the presence of Ukrainian refugees to develop a strategic cultural vision to bring together all the different ethnic and cultural groups in the country – Bulgarians, Roma, Turks, Pomaks, Ukrainians, Jews, etc. Art and culture media could send very strong messages as to how different groups do the most ordinary things, which rituals they observe and to seek out the similarities among the differences, or, as the song goes, „We are all different but our destiny is the same“. This is the key to overcoming discrimination – to stop paying attention to differences and see how you and the other person are alike.

The fieldwork provided food for thought in two main directions:

- **"Revolutionary (radical)" projects, initiatives and events**  
These can be projects that seek the get-together of all, or at least the main ethnic groups in Bulgaria, including Ukrainian refugees. Such approaches should place participants in situations where they are broadly "divided into team", with each team containing equal number of representatives of each group. Teams can be given tasks, helped in breaking down their tasks, etc. The design of the specific approaches can be developed further, the important thing is to adhere to the main principle –

removing the focus on the main discriminatory trait. If that trait is the fact that you are Roma, Turkish, Ukrainian or Bulgarian, then ethnicity should be ignored by both organisers and participants. This kind of project should seek to push participants out of their comfort zone and put them in situations where stereotypes lose their meaning and a common goal is pursued. It is important to note that the language barrier can be overcome with the participation of translators, who themselves can be part of the experiment – to see how successfully they have conveyed the ideas to participants.

Some additional suggestions:

- Consider a creative way, for example theatre, to tell about the situations Ukrainian refugees face in our country – bullying at school, obstacles to starting work or renting accommodation;
- Provide comparisons (if possible, with a hint of humour) of how people from different countries do certain things; these should provoke the audience – for example, make it clear that there are plenty of Bulgarians harbouring prejudice, but that prejudice can be overcome;
- Organise teams of children and parents to present Bulgarian and Ukrainian history, aiming to identify points of contact;
- Bring together a type of advisory board – people of different ages (including children) and different ethnic groups can join efforts and come up with for merging different cultures.

The recommendation of both our respondent and myself, based on my experience with the Parents Association, is to consider projects in which children and parents participate together, but children take the lead. Being less biased, they are the ones who can engage their parents in new games and adventures.

- **“Normalising (traditional)” projects, initiatives and events**

The second direction is to organise projects and initiatives that we will label “normalising”. Where “radical” projects aim to place participants under pressure and to challenge their emotions, perceptions and attitudes, creating a setting in which a new formula is in operation, then “normalising” projects should provide a connection with the familiar, with what people are used to. Particularly suitable for older people, such projects should aim to bring comfort through tradition and familiarity. Of course, they should also rely on the integration element. They should also bear in mind the language barrier, for example in the case of theatre, as many people still do not understand Bulgarian well, especially the spoken language.

It is important that any events, whether “revolutionary” or “normalising”, should be freely accessible – as long as possible – both to Ukrainians and to the other groups in Bulgarian society whose inclusion they aim to achieve.

Possible holidays to use: 24 August, Independence Day in Ukraine; 24 May, Slavonic Literacy Day for both countries.

## 6. Analysis of results

If we attempt to interpret the analysis using the concept for bringing groups together and integrating society, we should structure it as follows:

### 6.1. Attitudes and behaviours of the main study groups towards each other.

#### 6.1.1. The situation of Ukrainians.

Here is an image: *"When the war started, there were refugees from Mariupol in Berdyansk. I was a teacher in Ukrainian and we welcomed the refugees in the school. There were many wounded. They came from Mariupol with only the clothes on their backs... It was terrible, they had walked 70-80 km to Berdyansk, they were dirty, exhausted. We didn't know how long they had stayed without food, water, electricity"* (focus group, (FG), 56 yrs., F).

Leaving the country was also very difficult, especially if you were leaving occupied territories: *"...We evacuated because the city was under occupation. There were 21 military posts where the ruscists checked our phones and documents. Your phone had to be completely clean; they also checked our personal belongings; they looked in our cars and what we were carrying..."* (FG, F, 65 yrs.). Another respondent shared how they passed through 25 military posts. At each post they were asked where

they were going and they answered that they wanted to spend Easter in the village right after the post, in order to hide that they were leaving the country.

Let us briefly attempt to describe what life was like under the constant bombardment. *"I lived completely alone for four months under the bombs. It was very scary because they were throwing bombs at anything, anywhere. One night I heard a terrible, a bomb fell into the liman, a water column rose higher than the ninth floor of the block. Everybody came out to see what was going on, and I started screaming that shrapnel was flying and that they should hide... Gradually we learned how to determine, by the sound, whether it was bombs that were falling or Iranian drones, whether the air defence was working and whether we should hide... When bombs are flying, the only thing you can do is drop to your knees and pray. The noise is so scary that you become physically ill, especially at night... In the beginning, when I came to Bulgaria to my daughter and grandchildren, I could not communicate, I could not talk at all."* (FG, F, 70, Odessa). The woman visited a psychologist for a long time to be able to come out of this state. Some respondents also shared a specific type of pride in the face of the aggressor: *"If they want to bomb, let them bomb. We will not hide. We will live the way we want! They cannot defeat us!"* (FG, F, 65).

Ukrainian culture has also come under the blows of the war. According to our respondents, Russians deny the existence of Ukrainian culture and appropriate its

achievements, such as works of art, personalities and artists: *"Russians claim that everything originates from them"* (FG, F, 60). They plunder our museums and take the exhibits to Russia. In Irpen, for example, in a school which they had used as a base and which was taken back by the Ukrainians, they wrote on the wall *"Who allowed you to live so well?"*, apparently envious of the radically different standard of living from their own.

**These encroachments indicate that elements of authentic Ukrainian culture must be present in the planning of cultural events in order to show refugees that they have visibility and significance of their own and that Bulgarian society recognizes their cultural achievements. Additionally, respondents note that Ukrainians try to turn everything into a joke, so humour would be a strong tool in their involvement in cultural events.**

Among Ukrainians in the country there are quite a few Ukrainian women – often mothers with children or grandmothers, or mothers and grandmothers together. There are also men, but these are few – fathers of large families (3+ children), or fathers of disabled children; grandfathers. There are also whole families with less than 3 children who were outside Ukraine when Russia attacked. This should be kept in mind when thinking about cultural projects, whether "revolutionary" or "normalising". According to our respondents, there is no clear profile in terms of social status – there are wealthy and poorer families, *"they are all sorts"*. If there are groups missing from this spectrum, these are its extremes – it is thought that the richest families are unlikely to come to Bulgaria, while the poorest have simply not had the opportunity to leave the country. Many people originate from the eastern part of Ukraine like Odessa and Nikolaev. It does matter where people come from, the mental territorial division is into Western and Eastern Ukraine: *"Ukraine is very large... We lived in the western part where there is a stronger European influence, we speak more languages and so on. It's not like that in the east. There are a lot of people who have never travelled anywhere, don't even have a foreign passport. They don't speak English or German, any languages, and, frankly, they don't even know Ukrainian. They speak Russian... That's why it's hard to find jobs for them, they don't speak languages."*(II, NGO) People here are waiting for the war to end so they can go home because they lack the good conditions offered by Western countries: *"They really want to go back. Very few want to*

*stay here. The people who want to stay in the country they have arrived in are not here. They are in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, the UK, the Czech Republic, where conditions are better.*" (II, NGO) We should therefore bear in mind that there are in fact people who do not particularly wish to get close to those living in Bulgaria. In one of the discussions people candidly noted, "There has been virtually no integration in those nine months". There has been some progress for those working with Bulgarians, but not for their wives, for example. Some have been lucky to get closer to their neighbours.

People who were better received were those who already had relatives or friends in Bulgaria. There are people who feel deep gratitude to Bulgaria for having welcomed them: *"Bulgaria is a saintly country for having welcomed us, it is impossible to live under bombs [the respondent is crying]"*, (FG, F, 70, Odessa) *"Every morning when I wake up, I thank God for the new day and I thank Bulgaria for protecting me"* (FG, F, 60, Nova Kakhovka).

Let us turn our attention to the direct meeting with young people from Ukraine. Eleven people participated, aged between 12 and 22, with a predominance of teenagers around 14-16.

**Perhaps the most important observation – and this was beyond the topic of the conversation itself – is that the children/young people behaved completely 'normal', no different from their peers.** This is a tremendous accomplishment for the NGOs, (and of course their

parents and relatives), and I believe the situation is similar elsewhere and not just within the particular organization which organised the get-together. They laughed, bantered, had fun attempting to speak Bulgarian and to understand me, laughed at my attempts to scramble a Russian word. The NGOs have literally flooded these children with activities and opportunities. Whether there was a clear purpose to this – i.e., to keep them busy, to keep them occupied and develop their skillset, to keep their minds from the horror of war, was not evident. But, intentional or not, this result was the most important. Listening to these children, one could forget that they had left their homes, that they must have loved ones back home, in the midst of the war, that they were probably experiencing an overwhelming flood of feelings, including anger, hatred and frustration.

They spoke lightly and sincerely. They liked the Bulgarian countryside; those who had travelled in the mountains were impressed, they had travelled to various places in the country. Those who were of school age did not want to attend a Bulgarian school for the time being because they did not know the language and because they had to take equivalence exams. The main problem for them to communicate with Bulgarians was the language barrier, they had no other concerns. A possible approach would be initiatives in which, within a given task, Bulgarian-speaking children could help them learn Bulgarian, including conversational. One boy played table tennis with Bulgarian acquaintances

every weekend. During the day these children did all sorts of things – board games, drawing, reading, watching films.

### 6.1.2. The reaction of Bulgarians

Before introducing the specific experience of Ukrainian refugees, it is important to describe the social context – i.e., societal context – to which they belong. Namely, a society that is in the process of breaking down and transforming the norms imposed by the communist period which was characterised by conformity, adherence to imposed dogmas rather than expressing a personal or civic stance, and rejecting difference as a threat to the existence of this order (in the sense of both pro-Western orientation and physical or mental disabilities). The focus is on non-acceptance, even fear, of difference.

There is also a division in Bulgarian society over the war in Ukraine. It is by no means polarised (according to a nationally representative poll in March 2022, 61% do not justify the invasion and only 16% do). However, media discourse and social media have given ample publicity to a variety of propaganda claims that produce negative attitudes towards Ukrainians.

There are, for example, Ukrainian families whose standard of living is higher than the average for Bulgaria, and this makes Bulgarians feel that these people are “siphoning state resources” by being offered, for example, accommodation or other types of support: “*For*

*Bulgarians, these are not refugees... There is some envy. There are Ukrainian refugees who have expensive cars, have expensive clothes, their lifestyle before the war in Ukraine was better than that of Bulgarians” (II, NGO).* Observing the higher standard of these families leads to a desensitization on the issue that they come from a war situation and it is this sensitivity of Bulgarian citizens that should be raised. Cultural projects, activities and initiatives can achieve a lot in that direction.

For example, we can suggest the following topics to be addressed in a cultural event:

- What has happened and what is happening in Ukraine;
- Creating space for dialogue – what the audience thinks about it;
- Breaking of stereotypes – people from Ukraine can comment on the reflections shared by the audience;
- Creating empathy – involvement of Bulgarians or children of Bulgarians who survived World War II or other military conflict (Bulgarians returning from Syria, for example).

### 6.2. Possible allies and adversaries of the integration approach for the implementation of projects focused on culture

The first obvious allies are the aforementioned NGOs working directly with refugees. They are the link between Ukrainians and the Bulgarian state and society, but also the

actor that contributes most to the well-being of refugees in Bulgaria. They can also be used as a gateway for contacts with other organisations and businesses that can support the initiatives.

To what extent do the thinking and practices of these NGOs fit the integration model?

First of all (and quite naturally, given the position they occupy) of a go-between between refugees and Bulgaria (institutions and society), NGO representatives operate within the Bulgarian-Ukrainian dichotomy. Because their goal – easy as it is to formulate, but so labour-intensive in terms of everyday effort – is to do their best to help Ukrainians. An important conversation to be had with NGO's is that, being influential among Ukrainian refugees, they can play an actual integrative role. Could they not work towards sending Ukrainian, Roma, Bulgarian and Turkish ethnic children fishing, for example? Because one of the goals of the analysis is to send a message that **a well-coordinated network of organizations and (perhaps) institutions that deal with different groups of people in the country can make a joint effort and, within a project developed with sensitivity to the various groups, achieve real integration.**

Looking on from the position of these NGOs doing their excellent work, and assuming for a moment that the 2 main groups are Ukrainians and "the Bulgarian people", we will see that the integrative work, for which a lot of

effort is put, is not particularly successful – unlike the provision of all kinds of assistance, as already mentioned.

The path to integration is explicitly defined by the representatives of all three NGOs we spoke to. One of the respondents also gave a very clear and accessible definition of the term: *"...to be somewhat interested in the other person, where they come from, and maybe the key is to find the similarities between you or what you have in common, and similar topics that you might be interested in – that common environment where you can communicate, get to know each other and from there on accept each other. That's it. But when there's no meeting point between the two sides and you're just looking on from behind the curtains, there's no way integration can happen. It is the same with the Roma" (II, NGO).* The quotation clearly reveals the main approach – look for commonalities, for similarities between people and bring them together. We use the word "encounter" not only in the sense of getting people together in one space, but also in arranging this encounter in such a way that they can express themselves and see the other in a different light, other than simply being "Bulgarian", "Ukrainian", etc.

### 6.2.1. NGOs working with Ukrainian refugees

The organisations we included in the study – "Arms Wide Open", "For the Good", Ukrainian Kosher – started operation practically together. *"We thought we would only operate for one or a few months and nobody thought*



*about integration. Now I understand that we should have started earlier" (II, NGO).*

In reality, the NGOs' activities in support of arriving people and families are similar, as the needs of the families themselves are similar: help with accommodation, with finding a job, enrolling children in school and kindergarten, medical insurance, Bulgarian language courses, activities for the children, including help with the Bulgarian language. There may be some overlapping of activities, but there are enough people in need to keep all the organisations in operation. Moreover – unlike some Bulgarian NGOs that work in one and the same field – these organisations do not compete, on the contrary, they know each other well and support each other.

Let us look one NGO's understanding of successful integration: *"Successful integration is when children are able to enrol in a Bulgarian school after our study course, when people comment that they have found a job thanks to us are now able to argue with the state institutions in Bulgarian..." (II, NGO).* With all due respect to the work of these NGOs, this definition is incorrect. If we look more carefully, we will see that according to it, successful integration means providing people with the tools to join life in Bulgaria – school, business, difficulties with institutions. However, it does not take into account whether there is acceptance, understanding, tolerance between the group of the "Ukrainian refugees" and that of "Bulgarian citizens". Again, this does not diminish the work

of these NGOs in the slightest. It simply shows that at this stage there is no real understanding of integration, clear-cut and operationalised; in short NGOs are currently not working towards that goal.

The NGOs that help refugees and the refugees themselves are well integrated with each other, but this does not lead to integration with Bulgarian society, and our respondent is aware of this: *"In between the Ukrainian refugees and the NGOs you get Ukrainian communities in Bulgaria. But that's a bubble. There is no actual integration" (II, NGO).*

## 6. 2.2. Bulgarian institutions

Refugees are not easily accepted by the institutions: *"They were not easily accepted. As a foreigner, even though I've been here for 7 years, I need to take out papers, it's terrible. There has always been a terrible attitude and I don't think things are any different" (II, NGO).* Still, poor treatment is not ubiquitous.

Criticism, and direct criticism at that, is not lacking: *"Governments have done everything possible to force Ukrainians to leave. They only notified people of the programme at the last possible moment, the last day. Six months have gone by and we still do not have an adequate assessment of refugees. There are people who need help, and there are those who are able look after their families, but all are treated the same. Ukrainians are believed to be*

*rich and to not need help, but this is not true" (II, NGO).*

## 7. Conclusion

As in any study, in this one I once again suffer from the eternal postulate: no single study can provide answers to all questions. Currently, for example, Russian culture is banned from use in relation to Ukrainian refugees. The Russians, on the other hand, are actively bashing Ukrainian culture. At the moment, in the words of our respondents, they are "de-culturing" the country, or, quote: *"They want to destroy our identity"* (FG, F, 71). In this sense, perhaps looking for ways to expose Bulgarian society to some elements of Ukrainian culture might be important for Ukrainians themselves.

Although this report has become rather lengthy, I would like to end by reiterating what seems to me to be the most important starting point for future cultural policies, projects, initiatives and events: we do not know when the war will end, nor how many of the people who fled our country will remain after it is over.

**But the fact that the Ukrainian refugees are here now is a very good opportunity to build visions, policies and projects that will help the real integration of Bulgarian society.**

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# STEPS TOWARDS NEW AUDIENCES AND INTEGRATIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITY

## A25 CULTURAL FOUNDATION

For people forced to leave their country and settle in another, culture is not of paramount importance. At least not at first glance. However, after the purely humanitarian needs have been met, the need arises for the two sides to get to know each other and for relationships with the host society to be built. Knowledge of the cultural life of Ukrainians, the reactions of the cultural sector to welcoming them as refugees in our country, and research into their attitudes pinpoint several steps that could lead us to a smooth but stable process of getting to know each other and an enriching coexistence.

Most of these steps are applicable to cultural organisations and institutions that have to guide the host society through the future migration challenges towards a free life and the happiest possible coexistence. Their implementation does not require a change of public policies, although such a change is vital, but is based on the cur-

rent situation and the organisations' current capacities.

- Providing a richer **intercultural programme**, with encounters between cultures (using own archives, resources, partnerships);
- Providing **translation in at least one foreign language** during events and expositions;
- Organizing a special series of **family events** (as an additional element in the main programme of the organization, festival, meeting or event) to attract community members of different ages;
- Introducing **free tickets and free entry** for refugees and asylum seekers as an overall pricing policy of the organisation;
- Intensive targeted **communication with the various communities** within the locality or event area (invitations, surveys, arranging for meeting spaces and local initiatives) in order to gain trust and cooperation and safeguard against conflict;

- Informal preliminary **research on specificities, trends, habits** of different communities to be taken into account when organising events;
- In addition to the artistic program, **organizing meetings, discussions, informal conversations**, because they help participants to form opinions and take a public position;
- Intensive close **cooperation with organisations working on the field** with asylum seekers and those who have received protection.

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**A25 Cultural Foundation** is a non-governmental organization established in 2011. It strives to initiate, support and take part in cultural and social events that present various viewpoints with respect and interest, maintain intelligent and meaningful dialogue, and discover the fresh and relevant behind clichés and stereotypes.

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