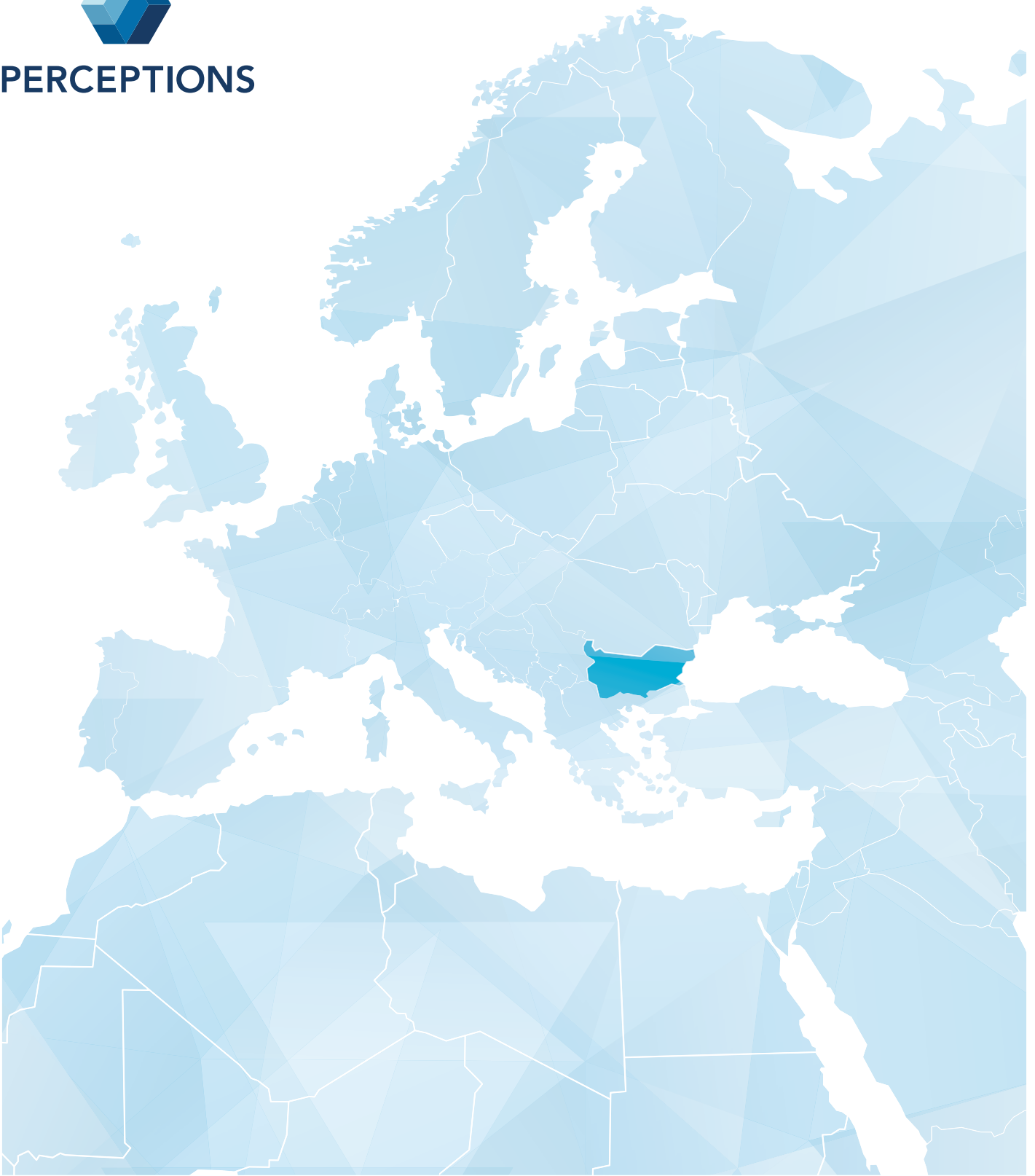




PERCEPTIONS



Bulgaria

PERCEPTIONS
Country Report

PERCEPTIONS RESEARCH:

Literature, studies, projects, stakeholders, solutions, tools and practices

DISCLAIMER:

Disclaimer: This report is based on desk-research conducted between 2019 and 2022 and covers major development between the period of 2015-2019. For more updated information on the country profile, please check the additional institutional links at the end of the document.



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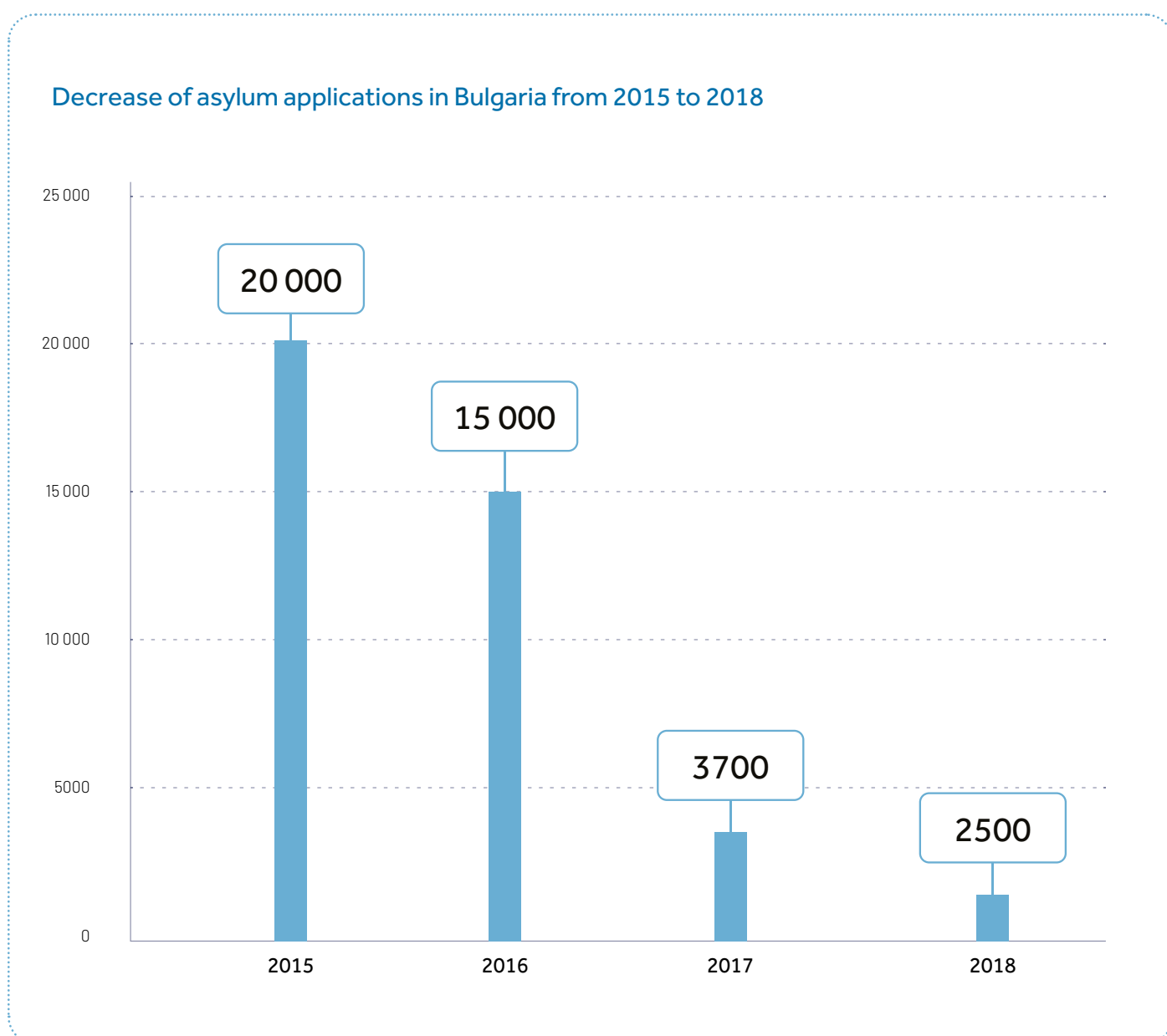
a) Geographical map



b) Short summary

In Bulgaria, border control, immigration, international protection and migrant integration are the responsibility of various state authorities: the Border Police Chief Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior, specialized in working in the border zone, the State Agency for Refugees, specialized in international protection, and the inter-institutional National Council, leading the state's effort on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration. From 1993, when Bulgaria ratified the UN Refugee Convention and the attendant Protocol, until 2012 the country faced a relatively low refugee inflow with an annual average of 1000 asylum applications. Significant change in this trend took place with the increase in the inflow of persons seeking international protection mainly due to the wave of displaced persons fleeing from the conflict in Syria and Iraq. The extreme changes in both the volume and the demographic structure of asylum-related migration has put Bulgaria into a new policy situation requiring urgent development and restructuring of the systems of reception and integration in the country.

c) Facts & figures



c) Full document

Institutional setting

In Bulgaria, border control, immigration, international protection and migrant integration are the responsibility of various state authorities, while other actors play an important role as well. This is detailed below.

Border control is the primary responsibility of Border Police Chief Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior, whose activity is regulated by the Law on the Ministry of the Interior of 27 June 2014 and various acts of secondary legislation. It is a specialized police structure, working in the border zone, border checkpoints, international airports and seaports, internal sea waters, territorial sea, border rivers, etc. Immigration is the prerogative of the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior and finds its regulation in the legislation on the work of the Ministry and, in substance, in the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria and its secondary legislation. The Migration Directorate regulates migration processes, exercises administrative control over the residence of foreigners in Bulgaria and counters irregular migration. The Migration Directorate also manages the pre-removal detention centres, where foreigners are placed before their return to their home countries.

Regarding international protection, relevant proceedings and the reception of persons seeking international protection are among the powers of the State Agency for Refugees, which is regulated in the Law on Asylum and Refugees from 1 December 2002 and relevant secondary legislation. The Agency manages reception centres, where foreigners seeking international protection are placed. Integration of foreigners having received asylum or international protection takes place under a special regulation¹, stipulating an integration agreement with the mayor of a specific municipality willing to accept the foreigner. Responsibilities are also assigned to the State Agency for Refugees, which facilitates the process of agreeing and creates the foreigner's integration

profile, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science, which facilitate foreigners' access to, respectively, employment, social services and education, and the Ministry of Health, which facilitates the access to healthcare. The regulation on integration manages formally the participation of international organizations and NGOs in migrants' integration. In fact, what is noticed is that integration in Bulgaria has so far been mainly NGO-led, with organizations providing various services to foreigners and facilitating their interaction with institutions and access to employment, healthcare, education, etc. (Ilcheva et al., 2019).

Strategically, the inter-institutional National Council leads the state's effort in the above areas on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, which encompasses all the above institutions and other government ministries, the state agencies of intelligence and national security, anti-trafficking authorities.

Short migration overview

Two instances of Bulgaria accepting refugees in the period between the two World Wars have been widely cited: the Armenians seeking to escape the genocide in Turkey, and the White Guard Russians fleeing the Bolshevik revolution (Krasteva, 2019). Krasteva further divides contemporary Bulgarian migration into five global periods: i) communist period, ii) post-communist period, iii) 'European period', iv) period of migrant/refugee crisis and v) period of post-migrant crisis. The communist period relates to the post-war period to 1989, characterized by strong politicization of migration policy and very strong control over both emigration and immigration. Some significant immigrant groups included students from the then so-called 'Third World'; citizens of the Soviet Union, working in industry and education or spouses of Bulgarian citizens and Vietnamese migrant workers. The post-communist period began in the 1990s to until

¹ Regulation on the Conditions and Order for Concluding, Executing and Terminating Integration Agreements of Foreigners who have been given Asylum or International Protection, 19 July 2017, <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=116399>.

the early 2010s, when markets and globalization drove immigration. The 'European' period started in the mid-2010s until the migrant/refugee 'crisis' and saw an increased number of applications for Bulgarian citizenship because of Bulgaria's EU membership. During the period of migrant/refugee 'crisis' between 2014 and 2016, Bulgaria became more clearly aware of its role as an external border of the EU. This resulted in a change in political discourse, allegedly phrasing refugees not as a humanitarian but as a security issue. Finally, during the period of post-migrant 'crisis', 2017–present, a trend of populist securitization and its adoption by mainstream parties continues, regardless of the significant decrease in migration flows.

From 1993, when Bulgaria ratified the UN Refugee Convention and the attendant Protocol, until 2012 the country faced a relatively low refugee inflow with an annual average of 1000 asylum applications. Significant change in this trend took place with the increase in the inflow of persons seeking international protection mainly due to the wave of displaced persons fleeing from the conflict in Syria and Iraq. (Mancheva & Ivanova, 2017).

Key development since 2015

In the period 2014–2016 Bulgaria experienced an unprecedented number of around 20.000 asylum applications per year in 2015 and 2016. Since 2017, there has been a sharp decline in the number of asylum applications – down to around 3700 in 2017 and 2500 in 2018. Krasteva (2019) notes that, in terms of country of origin, the profile of asylum seekers in Bulgaria reflects the global refugee flows, with top three countries of origin being Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. However, while in 2015 there was a significant number of asylum seeking Syrians who were fleeing from the military conflict in their country and who were granted international protection, in 2016 and 2017, the largest share of international protection seekers in Bulgaria were citizens of Afghanistan, the trend continuing also in 2018 and 2019. Krasteva (2019) also notes that the asylum seekers from some of the top countries of origin – Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, Pakistanis and Palestinians – have immigrant communities in Bulgaria, which (except for Pakistanis) are also among the largest immigrant communities from the Near and Middle East in the country. In terms of

gender, while Syrian migration during the crisis was mostly made up of families, the post-crisis refugee flow is considered predominantly male.

The extreme changes in both the volume and the demographic structure of asylum-related migration has put Bulgaria into a new policy situation requiring urgent development and restructuring of the systems of reception and integration in the country (Mancheva & Ivanova, 2017). The sharp rise in the number of asylum applications found the country's reception and integration infrastructure largely unprepared, with significant number of CSOs and volunteers directly supporting the work of institutions to meet asylum seekers' basic needs. Racist and xenophobic narratives also saw a great rise. After the initial period of difficulties, large infrastructural improvements and significant capacity building took place among asylum-related authorities and cooperation with IGOs and NGOs was largely streamlined. After the decline in the number of asylum applicants, expectations were for integration policies to be further developed and simplified. However, apart from an increase in the awareness of municipalities and employers of the opportunities of migrant integration, the overall process of migrants' settlement in society remains insufficiently structured.

For more information, see:

IOM Bulgaria:

<https://bulgaria.iom.int/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bulgaria:

<https://www.mfa.bg/en/>

Ministry of Interior affairs Bulgaria:

<https://www.mvr.bg/en/home>



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