



REPORT SUMMARY

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRATION IN BULGARIA

The report was prepared under Activity 2.4 of the project.

KEY FINDINGS

The survey reveals a society with stable and firmly established attitudes towards refugees and migration. Between 2024 and 2026, there is no overall shift in attitudes, but in several specific areas acceptance becomes more conditional, expectations of migrants increase, and greater restrictions emerge on their permanent and equal inclusion in society.

These developments coincide with growing caution and deteriorating attitudes towards immigration in Europe. The data provide no basis for attributing the observed changes to individual information campaigns or project activities. Many attitudes persist regardless of changes in the information environment, while the broader social and international context — migration patterns, wars and crises, political debate and perceptions of security — provides a more plausible framework for understanding how they form and evolve.

In this environment, the potential impact of communication activities must be assessed realistically. They can improve awareness, correct specific misconceptions and reach undecided groups, but are unlikely, on their own, to change deeply established beliefs within a short period. Their value lies primarily in the long-term effort to improve understanding of migration, distinguish facts from entrenched perceptions and prejudices, and lay the foundations for a more informed and balanced public discussion. Changes in the population's overall attitudes

should therefore not, on their own, serve as a measure of the success or failure of an individual project or information campaign.

CONTEXT

Between 2024 and 2026, attitudes towards migration in Europe develop in a climate of growing caution. Following a prolonged period of improvement in attitudes towards immigration, European data now indicate a reversal, and in 2026 negative attitudes towards immigration from non-EU countries outweigh positive ones. In Bulgaria, this is also reflected in attitudes towards rights: the importance attached to one's own civil rights increases, while the share of people who consider refugees' rights entirely unimportant rises from 8% to 13%. Other values remain relatively stable, suggesting that the change relates more specifically to attitudes towards refugees than to a general shift in values.

More negative attitudes towards refugees' rights do not develop against a backdrop of deteriorating assessments of conditions in the country. On the contrary, in 2026 average assessments improve in all four areas surveyed: the economy, the social welfare system and services, education and healthcare.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM REFUGEE

Most people continue to correctly associate the term “refugee” with fleeing conflict, violence or persecution. This understanding is weakening, however, and refugees are more frequently associated with seeking better economic opportunities. The distinction between the need for protection and economic migration is becoming blurred. Refugees also continue to be widely associated with irregular entry into the country. The belief that many arrivals do not genuinely need protection but come for economic reasons or to access social services remains entrenched. At the same time, administrative data show a decline in asylum applications and migration pressure compared with the previous year.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

At the broadest level, attitudes remain stable, but specific dimensions of acceptance are changing. Refugees evoke sympathy and concern alongside distrust and fear, while attitudes towards other immigrants are more often neutral. Differences by education and place of residence are becoming more pronounced: Sofia stands out as a more accepting environment, while smaller towns are approaching villages in their negative attitudes towards refugees. This shows that the stable overall picture conceals substantial divisions within society. More negative perceptions of refugees are concentrated almost entirely among people without higher education. A different trend emerges for other immigrants: in Sofia, positive attitudes weaken in favour of neutral ones, while attitudes in villages improve. There are also age differences: younger people are more positive towards immigrants than towards refugees, whereas middle-aged people view refugees more favourably.

AWARENESS AND THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Between the two project survey waves, the clearer change concerns the information environment in which attitudes are formed rather than self-reported awareness. The data show that social media are becoming an increasingly important source of information (from 35% to 43%), while traditional media retain a significant but weakening position in terms of trust (the share trusting them falls from 54% to 45%).

The declining role of traditional media, led by television, is also reflected in the global IPSOS survey, where reach and trust were already lower than those recorded in Bulgaria in

2024. Bulgaria may move considerably closer to the pattern seen in more developed EU countries in the coming years. Future communication planning should take this trend into account by reducing the share of television and radio, discontinuing print-based information provision, and increasing the share of social media and events in the communication mix.

PERSONAL CONTACT

Personal contact with refugees remains unchanged, involving 24% of the population in both waves. People who have supported refugees are considerably more open to social closeness, rights and shared responsibility for integration, and place less emphasis on economic self-sufficiency as a condition for acceptance. This does not, however, eliminate perceptions of threat at national level, which remain widespread even among people with personal contact and those who support refugees. Personal acceptance and concerns about the consequences for the country can coexist. Contact is most common among working-age people and least common among the oldest respondents. The strongest association remains with practical assistance: people with direct contact are much more likely to have supported refugees. Those who have provided support are also more likely to expect successful integration and a positive contribution to the country.

ACCEPTANCE AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

Between 2024 and 2026, willingness to receive refugees declines: the share of people willing to receive those fleeing war, conflict, violence or persecution in Bulgaria falls from 62% to 53%, while attitudes towards labour migration remain virtually unchanged. This indicates a more specific reduction in willingness to receive refugees rather than a general withdrawal of acceptance from all foreigners.

In personal relationships, outright rejection does not become more widespread, but acceptance becomes more limited. The share of people unwilling to accept a refugee in any social role remains at 39%, while the group willing to accept one in only one or a few roles grows. Where acceptance is most limited, functional relationships, such as having a refugee as one’s doctor, take precedence, while closer relationships on an equal footing remain more difficult to accept. At the same time, the most accepting group becomes even more positive, widening the gap between positions.

The ideal refugee in 2026 is self-supporting, accepts the local way of life, has professional skills, speaks Bulgarian and is well educated. Being Christian matters to 46% of the population, and having white skin to 32%.

PROTECTION AND CONTROL

The strongest change concerns the rejection of unconditional admission. Disagreement that every refugee seeking international protection should be admitted increases to 65% in 2026, compared with 56% in 2024. Support for completely closing the borders also rises. This does not mean rejection of the principle of protection itself: more than half of those rejecting unconditional admission would nevertheless accept a refugee in their personal circle. Rather, a preference for selective and controlled admission is becoming established, instead of automatic protection. Support for detention in reception centres pending a decision also grows and is not confined to people with negative attitudes. Rejection of unconditional admission is now widespread and is not limited to particular groups by education, income or place of residence. Even among those who have provided practical support, this position outweighs approval. Support for closing the borders is lower in Sofia, but otherwise varies less across social groups than other attitudes.

RIGHTS SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Bulgarians continue to broadly support refugees' access to education, healthcare and the labour market, but increasingly believe it should be restricted rather than full. For the labour market, restricted access now receives more support than full access. The dividing line is even clearer when it comes to permanent settlement: support for full access to permanent residence and citizenship declines, while the share rejecting such access altogether almost doubles, from 14% to 24%.

Assistance to refugees remains acceptable when it is specific and addresses immediate needs. Shelter, food and language training continue to receive broad support, including among people who maintain considerable social distance from refugees. Financial assistance is the only form rejected by a majority. In 2026, a clear distinction therefore emerges between willingness to help a person in need and willingness to accept that person as a permanent and equal member of society.

FEARS AND THREATS

Refugees continue to be perceived as a threat. Concerns relating to security, crime and cultural differences remain the most widespread. Most individual fears do not increase substantially, but negative perceptions are increasingly combined. The belief that differences in mentality and religion hinder full integration becomes stronger. Immigration is increasingly viewed primarily as a problem for the country, while the group recognising both risks and opportunities shrinks. This change stems mainly from the weakening of this middle position rather than the disappearance of the small positively disposed group. Fear of job losses also grows and is strongest among pensioners rather than employed or unemployed people. In villages, concerns about disease and unfamiliar religious and cultural beliefs stand out, while concerns about employment are stronger in smaller towns. The combination of different perceptions of threat is becoming more widespread even among people with personal contact and those who have provided support.

MIGRATION POLICY

Assessments of government policy remain stable, with the prevailing view being that it is too lenient (54% in 2026). The widespread belief that most immigrants are residing irregularly in Bulgaria also persists. There is no substantial change in preferred treatment of irregular residents: placement in reception centres receives the most support, followed by arrest and only then by entry into an asylum procedure.

Support for family reunification continues to decline, with opposition becoming more categorical. A higher share approving this option is found only among parents.

The share believing that too many refugees have been admitted declines, but uncertainty grows, as assessments of policy reflect broader perceptions of control, procedures and admission conditions rather than simply the number of arrivals.

INTEGRATION

Integration is seen as a shared responsibility, but in practice the main effort is expected from migrants. A total of 59% believe that both immigrants and the host society bear responsibility, although Bulgaria remains below the European level on this measure. Integration itself continues to be judged predominantly unsuccessful, particularly for refugees; the slight improvement between the two waves is insufficient to establish a clear change.

The understanding of successful integration is based on economic contribution and adaptation: paying taxes, speaking Bulgarian, having education and qualifications, and accepting local values. The requirement for economic contribution becomes even stronger: paying taxes is “very important” to 75%, compared with 64% in 2024. Citizenship, by contrast, remains the least important factor. Combined with growing restrictions on access to citizenship, this points to a model of integration based more on participation, self-sufficiency and adaptation than on full membership of society.

SUMMARY

The most important finding from the comparison between 2024 and 2026 is the stability of the underlying structure of attitudes. Overall attitudes towards refugees and immigrants, the core group expressing complete social rejection, assessments of migration policy, and many fears and perceptions remain virtually unchanged. Where statistically confirmed change occurs, it follows a consistent pattern: different indicators point towards more conditional acceptance, more restricted rights and firmer expectations of refugees and migrants.

At the same time, changes in the information environment are not followed by comparable changes in public attitudes. Social media play a growing role, trust in the media

declines, and awareness remains virtually unchanged. Assessments of media coverage are themselves closely associated with pre-existing attitudes towards migration. This reveals a society with firmly established positions, in which new information is interpreted through existing attitudes.

The data provide no basis for attributing the observed developments to individual information campaigns or project activities. Some changes move in the same direction as the broader deterioration in attitudes towards immigration in Europe, while many attitudes remain stable regardless of changes in the information environment. This points to the broader social and international context — migration patterns, wars and crises, political debate and perceptions of security — as a more plausible framework within which these attitudes form and change.

Communication activities matter, but their potential impact must be assessed realistically. They can improve awareness, correct specific misconceptions and engage undecided groups, but are unlikely, on their own, to change deeply established public attitudes within a short period. Changes in the population’s overall attitudes should therefore not, on their own, be used as a measure of the success or failure of an individual project or information campaign.

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