



NRT BULGARIA 2019

Report

Author: Bistra Ivanova, Multi Kulti Collective

**SIRIUS is co-funded by the
European Union**





Sofia, Multi Kulti Center - 24 April 2019



Context

The National Round Table (NRT) 2019 program was structured around 4+1 topics related to educational integration of refugee children. The 4 main topics were chosen by the participants in the NRT 2018 in Sofia as the most relevant nationally. To take advantage of the pan-European nature of the SIRIUS Network and its spin-off projects, a special focus was put on sharing research findings and best practices from other EU countries to allow Bulgarian stakeholders to get inspired to try new approaches or methods. In addition, the organizers offered 1 extra topic on funding opportunities where 3 panelists from a private company, a community foundation and an umbrella donors' organization shared their expertise for successful fundraising along with information on open calls for proposals. The four main topics were:

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee minors of school-age

The situation of unaccompanied minors in Bulgaria was thoroughly discussed at the NRT 2018 as one of the most challenging topics, especially in the context of Bulgaria being a "transit country" and thus often being unattractive to young refugees. This, together with the limited capacities of their guardians (social workers from the State Agency for Refugees) and the lack of a comprehensive national coordination mechanism, leaves this particularly vulnerable group with insufficient support. Therefore, the need identified last year was to collect good practices from other European countries. Several of them were presented (for example a student-centered job-placement approach from a Flemish school in Belgium). At national level, a special focus was put on a new promising project realized by Know How Center for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University in a partnership with State Agency for Refugees. "To fulfil (im)possible dreams" uses a student-centered approach and draws a "map" of the desired future and provides mentoring to young unaccompanied refugees.

Cooperation between schools and NGOs

The cooperation between schools and NGOs in Bulgaria often happens spontaneously and based on short-term projects. A more structured approach would ensure that the gaps in refugees' education are filled in a timely and well-planned manner. To feed the discussion with best practices from the EU, the SIRIUS Watch 2018 "Role of non-formal education in migrant children inclusion: links with schools" was presented with a focus on practices which could be implemented in Bulgaria. The panel continued with input from a school principal from the city of Harmanli, where the biggest refugee reception center in Bulgaria is located. She discussed the accessibility of schools, the needs of schools and children and opportunities for cooperation.

Materials in support of teachers for working with refugee students

Since the Bulgarian educational system has been facing a higher number of refugee students only in recent years, the capacity of teachers and the amount of materials they can use in the classroom is not very high. In this panel several organizations presented new methodologies they have created to support teachers working with refugee



students Such materials are not widely distributed and only a limited number of teachers is being trained how to use them. However, the policy reform opportunity would be to train more current and future teachers in various forms – at university level, summer schools, lifelong learning training programs, etc.

Enhancing the motivation of parents of refugee children

Many studies show the importance of parent involvement in the educational process of their children. A comprehensive coordination mechanism between various stakeholders would secure a better flow of information and parental engagement. Since this is a very difficult area in Bulgaria, especially in the context of its 'transit country' profile, experience from other European countries was shared through a presentation of the ALFIRK report: Good practices for migrant parent involvement in education. The State Agency for Refugees also presented the best practices their social workers use in order to motivate parents.

National Round Table

The Bulgarian NRT was held on 24 April 2019 in the Multi Kulti Center in Sofia – a community center which promotes diversity and migrant integration. The whole day event “Positive Developments and Steps Ahead for the Educational Integration of Refugee Children: Good Practices from Bulgaria and Europe” was co-organized by Multi Kulti Collective, the Ministry of Education and UNHCR Bulgaria. There were 34 policy makers, civil servants, headmasters, teachers, social workers, researchers and civil society experts. They came from various organizations such as the Ministry of Education, the Regional Inspectorate of Education (Haskovo), the State Agency for Refugees, the State Agency for Child Protection, various schools and universities, the Syndicate of Bulgarian Teachers, international and national NGOs such as the Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas, Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants and others, as well as private companies with strong SCR policies and community foundations. The program was divided into several panels around the 4+1 topics. It was designed to allow space for presentations (information about current developments, research findings, best practices, etc.) followed by small group multi-stakeholders' discussions which were discussed afterwards in the plenary.

Inputs and debate points

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee minors of school-age

First of all, unaccompanied minors need to be made aware that education is compulsory in Bulgaria. Secondly, education options need to be expanded, with options such as night school, individual educational opportunities, dual education opportunities (studying and working). It is well known that many unaccompanied minors in Bulgaria drop out of school because they need to support themselves and their families abroad. Besides the educational part, emphasis needs to be put on helping the youngsters finding safe part time jobs. It is needed to adopt a student-centered approach and to draw a 'map' to the students' 'dream future'. Cooperation between



NGOs and other stakeholders should be strengthened so that NGOs can offer opportunities for students' free time, education as well as offering mentors from Bulgarian and migrant origin.

Cooperation between school and NGOs

Participants agreed that for stronger cooperation between schools and NGOs there needs to be a clear framework of the possibilities for NGOs to access schools including concrete steps which need to be taken. The aim of this cooperation should not only be to increase the educational success of the students but also their inclusion. Trained volunteers and mentors as well as community centers and sport clubs could complement the school activities in order for the children to have a full-day form of education.

Materials in support of teachers for working with refugee students

The participants identified the need for more educational opportunities for teachers who have never been trained to work with refugee students. Peer-learning opportunities between teachers on national level could be organized. Study visits in other EU countries could be eye-opening for teachers. EU projects could be used for this. Due to cultural differences, meetings with refugee parents could be organized with the help of social workers. Additional specialists such as cultural mediators could help teachers in the classroom. Teachers and school principals have a big need to be professionalized on this topic.

Enhancing the motivation of parents of refugee children

The participants identified the need of more space for discussions between teachers and refugee parents. This could even be done in the form of an informal 'café'. Information exchange about the educational systems of Bulgaria and the country of origin could be very helpful to determine where the children are situated in the educational system at the moment. Parents could be made feel more appreciated if they are offered the chance to teach something to all students. Schools need to have a strong role as community centers and offer enough community opportunities such as festivals, celebrations, cultural events, including ones dedicated to the countries where the refugee parents and students come from. Since many refugee parents need to learn Bulgarian language, the schools could offer classes for adults too in order to strengthen the connection with school and invite parents to actually go there regularly.

Conclusions

The NRT program offered many opportunities for formal and informal discussions between various stakeholders. The program presented many best practices from Bulgaria and Europe which could be replicated and scaled up. The last panel on funding opportunities aimed at presenting concrete calls for proposals as well as fundraising tips so that these projects could be realized. The pillars of the SIRIUS 2.0 project were presented – the SIRIUS Watch, the Learning Exchange Visits as well as the Policy Conferences and there was significant interest in them. Some of the concrete steps forward include:



- Strengthening the cooperation between all stakeholders to secure a constant flow of information and to reduce the risk of duplication of activities;
- Providing evidence-based policy recommendations to policy makers;
- Strengthening the cooperation between schools and NGOs and offering more supplementary activities, including community events;
- Sharing information about best practices from Europe and Bulgaria on organizational level and possibly replicating it;
- Promoting the teachers' materials to a wider audience and incorporating them in already existing training programs;
- Including a refugee-related documentary in a big educational film festival in Sofia;
- Searching for study-visit opportunities at European level.

Finally, the NRT was closed with the agreement that a report will be produced with the key discussion points from the meeting. A follow-up meeting will take place in spring 2020.

Outcomes

One of the biggest successes of the NRT was to bring policy makers, practitioners and researchers together while facilitating them to be engaged in meaningful solution-focused discussions. Here are some of the main outcomes of the meeting:

- The participants were informed about the results of two European-wide research papers conducted by SIRIUS (SIRIUS Watch 2018, ALFIRK) with a focus on best practices and possible approaches;
- The participants were informed about best practices in Bulgaria (for example, the educational mediator in Harmanli which could be transferred to Sofia as a practice);
- In the small groups, it was discussed how to implement some best practices (legal framework, stakeholders to be involved, resources needed, practical matters);
- The participants were informed about new research projects in Bulgaria (for example, on unaccompanied minors), or the results of completed ones (for example, teachers' manuals on diversity);
- The participants were informed about the current practices by various national institutions and the current situation of refugee students (State Agency for Refugees, State Agency for Child Protection);
- In the end, the participants were informed about funding opportunities and discussed concrete steps for fundraising for concrete initiatives with several donors;
- The NRT provided opportunities for informal discussions, new contacts, strengthening of cooperation and a common vision on a national level among various stakeholders.



Continuity with the NRT 2018

All 4 topics discussed in 2019 were identified by the participants in the NRT 2018. Many of them were interested in using SIRIUS' pan-European nature and exchange more with other stakeholders in the EU through learning more about EU studies and best practices as well as study visits and conference exchange opportunities. The program offered a combination between input and sharing / discussion sessions to provide adequate context for new idea development, exchange and partnerships. Many of the participants of the NRT in 2018 were invited in 2019 as well which also secured continuity in terms of professional development and exchange.

Challenges

As in 2018, the main challenge remained how to involve migrant-run organizations and migrant leaders. Even through the networks of the Ministry of Education and UNHCR Bulgaria this proved to be very difficult. Their number is very limited in Bulgaria and our biggest motivation is to empower and support them. Some of the migrant leaders invited were interested to attend the event but they were not able to join because they work during the day.



NRT BULGARIA 2019

Participants

**SIRIUS is co-funded by the
European Union**





Name	Organisation/ institution	Position in organisation/ institution
POLICY MAKERS		
Greta Gancheva	Ministry of Education	Head of department
Aneliya Yotova	Ministry of Education	Senior expert
Viktoriya Kirilova	Ministry of Education	Senior expert
Neli Dyalkova	Regional Education Inspectorate in Haskovo	Senior expert
TEACHERS, TEACHER-TRAINERS, SCHOOL-LEADERS OR OTHER SCHOOL REPRESENTATIVES		
Neli Todorova	66 School Sofia	Principal
Svetla Georgieva	Ivan Vazov school in Harmanli	Principal
OTHER RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS		
Yanka Takeva	Teachers' Union	Chairperson
Kristina Stavreva	State Agency for Refugees	Senior expert
Emiliya Mincheva	State Agency for Refugees	Senior expert
Diana Beleva	State Agency for Refugees	Senior expert
Krasimira Zaneva	State Agency for Refugees	Senior expert
Kina Sabeva	Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants	Chairperson
Chaya Koleva	Bulgarian Red Cross	Social worker
Valentina Gocheva	Bulgarian Red Cross	Social worker
Radoslava Zagorova	Caritas Sofia	Coordinator
Angelina Kaneva	Caritas Sofia	Coordinator
Katerina Stoyanova	CVS Bulgaria	Chairperson
Valery Pandzharov	Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation	Program Manager
Krasimira Velichkova	Bulgaria Donor's Forum	Chairperson
Elizabeth Valcheva	Experian	Expert
Emiliya Bratanova van Harten	UNHCR	Integration associate
Iva Lazarova	UNHCR	Integration associate
Mathijs Le Rutte	UNCHR	Head of mission
Bistra Ivanova	Multi Kulti Collective	Chairperson
Panayot Chafkarov	Multi Kulti Collective	Program manager
Anna Krasteva	CERMES with New Bulgarian University	Researcher
Biser Spirov	Lumos	Chairperson
Vilyana Markova	Agency for Social Assistance	Expert
Tanya Reytan-Marincheshka	Association for Refugees and Migrants-Bulgaria	Chairperson
Milena Dyankova	State Agency for Child Protection	Expert
Neli Keremidchieva	Community for Democratic Education	Chairperson
Radostina Antonova	Know-How Center with New Bulgarian University	Researcher