

Original article

## Bulgarian migration policy – contemporary challenges along the Balkan transit route

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### INFORMATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This article constitutes a condensed attempt to reflect on the contemporary role of the Republic of Bulgaria in the context of the Balkan transit route and challenges to ensure security in the region. The main questions the author addresses include the influence of the mechanisms of regulating the flow of immigrants introduced by individual countries in close proximity to Bulgaria, as well as the way in which the country struggling with many social and economic problems secures its borders against the uncontrolled inflow of the illegal migration.

### KEYWORDS

Balkan transit route, migration policy, European migration crisis, EU-Turkey readmission agreement



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## Introduction

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Republic of Bulgaria, like most other EU countries, is experiencing the effects of the migration crisis resulting from growing instability in the Middle East, Asia or North Africa. Therefore, disregarding the importance of the location of the Republic of Bulgaria within the area of the Balkan transit route discussed in this chapter may negatively affect the stability of the EU. The problem of protecting the Bulgarian border seems to be significant because 17,977 immigrants accused of unlawful entry into the country were detained in Bulgaria in the period from January to November 2016. However, it is impossible to provide unambiguous data that would estimate the real scale of this problem [1]. The situation is even more complicated by the fact of treating Bulgaria (just like another European country – Greece, but also Serbia or Macedonia) exclusively as a transit country for immigrants who, most after the registration of an asylum application in the State Agency for Refugees leave the country before the institution issues an appropriate decision. Others, however, after crossing the border, go directly to places offering higher social benefits – including Germany, Austria or Sweden [2]. In the last resort, however, it should be remembered that in the face of the migration crisis no state functions in a “vacuum”, which is why the

issue of establishing the EU external border exposes Bulgaria's critical location on the world map. Even though currently the route of illegal immigrants' movement through Bulgarian borders seems to be relatively small compared to other EU countries, it is an alternative to other migration routes within the Balkan transit route.

## 1. The Balkan transit route and the position of Bulgaria in times of the migration crisis

According to the data of the National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, from January 1, 1993 to September 30, 2017, 82,308 people submitted the asylum applications. A special increase in procedures concerning granting the refugee status was noted (as in other EU countries affected by the migration crisis) in 2013. Within the last less than 4 years, 61,041 immigrants, which is over 74% of applications submitted over 24 years, applied for asylum in Bulgaria. Only in 2016, Bulgaria was to become a host country for 19,418 people coming mostly from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, although the majority of them did not have any documents that could prove their identity. Even though from January 1 to September 30 this year slightly over 3000 applicants were registered, and the number of immigrants crossing the border is not likely to exceed the values recorded last year, the protection of the Bulgarian border being the external border of the EU should not lose its importance [3]. Figure 1 presents data on the number of applications received throughout the country.

The first reason why Bulgaria could not avoid the problem of mass migration (especially in 2012-2017) is the dependence of the country on the other popular migration routes, i.e. the Western Mediterranean route leading from Morocco to Portugal or Spain, and the Middle Mediterranean one for immigrants coming from Tunisia or Libya and entering the territory of Italy. Nonetheless, a crucial role for the internal situation of Bulgaria is played by the

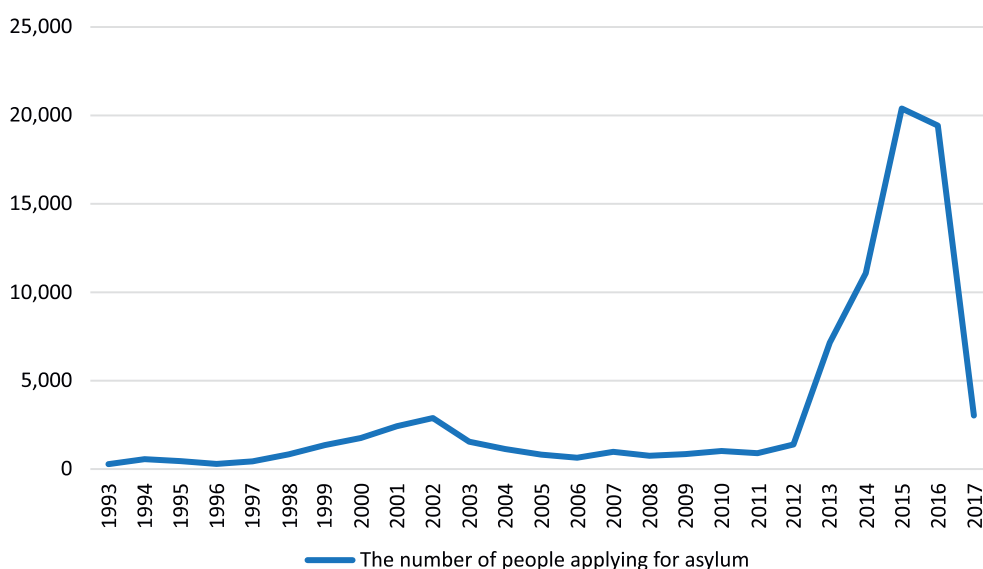


Fig. 1. The number of people applying for asylum from January 1, 1993 to September 30, 2017  
Source: Own elaboration based on: [3].

policies of the Eastern Mediterranean countries, which apart from Bulgaria include Greece and Romania, as well as the Western Balkans (in particular Croatia, Macedonia, and Serbia), treated by persons of Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi or Pakistani origin as a transit route section [4].

Therefore, in addition to pressures from the Western Mediterranean and the Middle Mediterranean route to which the Schengen states belong, Bulgaria located in South-eastern Europe must face the migration challenges within the Balkan transit route, and above all counteract the migratory pressures that hit the country as a result of Greek negligence. Especially at the time of the most massive migration flows in this country, the crisis was proportionally "spreading" over other countries. Macedonia and later Serbia followed Greece at the so-called "front line" since immigrants traveled from these countries through Hungary, Croatia or Slovenia towards Western Europe. The natural course of events was the sudden increase in illegal migration in Bulgaria itself, as by September 2015 its territory entered 6,800 people, and then 5,000 of them left the country immediately [5, 6]. However, it is extremely interesting that at first Bulgaria was not a destination eagerly chosen by, among others, Middle Eastern immigrants who from Turkey crossed the Evros (Maritsa) River or a small land section heading directly towards Greece. The deliberate avoidance of the Bulgarian border resulted, therefore, from the unfavorable social and economic situation of one of the poorest EU countries, as well as stringent solutions for admitting immigrants or the belief of inhumane treatment of refugees held in Bulgarian centers, the proof of which were hunger strikes in the towns of Lyubimets and Busmantsi in 2013<sup>1</sup>. The main route leading through the Western Balkans seemed to be a shorter and easier way to overcome due to the possibility of crossing through the territories of Serbia or Macedonia, i.e., non-EU states and thus unlimited by pan-European solutions so that initially avoiding them did not pose significant difficulties for immigrants. Another reason why Bulgaria was not considered to be the migration center on the Balkan route relates to the European transfer policy. Based on the Dublin system in force, when leaving the first EU country, immediately after crossing its external border, the other EU states were allowed to extradite immigrants to the country responsible for entry of foreigners into the EU territory (in this case Bulgaria). Therefore, potential asylum seekers aware of the consequences of solutions adopted at the European level went directly to the country, which, after submitting relevant applications, could offer them more favorable conditions of stay. More frequently entered Greece, unlike Bulgaria, was part of the Schengen area and had a shorter and more defective asylum procedure<sup>2</sup>. The situation changed when

<sup>1</sup> Cases of beatings carried out by the Bulgarian security services were also reported. *Syrian Refugees in Bulgarian Shelter Declare Hunger Strike*, [online]. novinite.com Sofia News Agency. Available at: <http://www.novinite.com/articles/153462/Syrian+Refugees+in+Bulgarian+Shelter+Declare+Hunger+Strike> [Accessed: 17 October 2017]; *Refugees Go on Hunger Strike at Bulgaria Detention Center*, [online]. novinite.com Sofia News Agency. Available at: <http://www.novinite.com/articles/153501/Refugees+Go+on+Hunger+Strike+at+Bulgaria+Detention+Center> [Accessed: 17 October 2017].

<sup>2</sup> A common case is also an attempt to avoid registration within the countries forming the external EU border so that it could not be proved against which EU countries the provisions of the so-called Dublin system should apply to at the time of submitting the application in the target country. Moreover, the granting of asylum seeker status is not related to the necessity of sending a refugee to the first safe third country, but rather to the right to remain in the state that has granted asylum. J. Dobrowolska-Polak. *Turcja, Unia Europejska i uchodźcy. Porozumienia w sprawie zarządzania kryzysem migracyjnym*. Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego. 2016;229, p. 3; S. Fratzke. *Not adding up: the fading promise of Europe's Dublin System*, [online]. Brussels: Migration Policy Institute; 2015, p. 1-6. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MPIe-Asylum-DublinReg.pdf> [Accessed: 28 October 2017]; Л. Кючуков. *Влияние*

Greece, in cooperation with FRONTEX<sup>3</sup>, decided to secure the islands in the Aegean Sea. In 2012, a 10.5 km fence was erected near the border with the Turkish city of Edirne, which is only a small fragment of the land section along more than 200 km-long river barrier and is thus treated as the safest migration route from Turkey to Greece, allowing to avoid crossing the Aegean Sea<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Tightening of migration practices within the Balkan route

In addition to the growing awareness of neglect in Greek migration policy, the situation in the other Balkan states was directly affected by information coming in September 2015, for example, from Germany about tighter border controls, or from Austria, whose new, more rigorous migration policy was testifying to the fact that the introduced limits of admissions and in the near future possible total restrictions on the reception of refugees, will make the Balkans area the only “hot spot”, that is an accessible point for third-country nationals and not a transit route as yet. Similar changes took place in other countries. Since then, Slovakia has been controlling its borders with Austria and Hungary, Austria has blocked the possibility of crossing the border with Hungary, and Hungary has closed the borders with Serbia and Croatia and began to build lines of entanglements, thus activating the route through Croatia and Slovenia. That is why the sealing of borders by individual European states was widely discussed in the Balkans [7, p. 1, 2; 8]. In 2015, it turned out that countries that had dealt not long ago with the aftermath of the Yugoslav civil war, resulting from the ethical and historical past as well as the strong centrifugal tendencies, had faced another challenge. Mutual accusations were revealed, among others in Greek-Macedonian relations, already damaged by long-term conflict for the name Macedonia. In 2015, the Macedonian authorities accused Athens of deliberately directing refugees towards the border with Macedonia, which is why in November 2015 the first fence was built, blocking the route from the Greek side. Like Croatia or Serbia, Macedonia decided to limit the influx of immigrants only to people from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, but it soon turned out that the documents issued by the Greek services were systematically falsified. A few months later, with the financial support of Hungary and the approval of the other members of the Visegrad Group, another border fence was erected. Because of closing the border, the immigrants who got stuck in the Greek city of Idomeni tried to destroy the wall, which was met with the immediate response from the Macedonian police. Athens appeals for the opening of the border and allowing access for thousands of immigrants to the territory of Macedonia<sup>5</sup> remained without any effect. As

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на бежанската криза върху българското общество в България, [online]. p. 1-3. Available at: <https://www.president.bg/docs/1484147036.docx> [Accessed: 28 October 2017]; A. Nicolov. *The European refugee crisis: Bulgaria's wake-up call?*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/alice-nicolov/european-refugee-crisis-bulgaria%E2%80%99s-wake-up-call> [Accessed: 17 October 2017].

<sup>3</sup> The European Border and Coast Guard Agency established in 2004 to, among others, combat illegal migration.

<sup>4</sup> In the literature on the subject, the increase in responsibility for loopholes arising in the asylum procedure took place to a large extent after January 2015 when the left-wing party Syriza won the Greek parliamentary election is particularly emphasized. *Greece completes anti-migrant fence at Turkish border*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/147035/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-completes-anti-migrant-fence-at-turkish-border> [Accessed: 28 October 2017]; *Through Bulgaria*, [online]. Available at: <http://moving-europe.org/through-bulgaria/> [Accessed: 28 October 2017].

<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that at the end of February 2016, 7,000 people camped on the Greek-Macedonian border.

a last resort, the Greeks announced that the police operating in an inhuman way in addition to tear gas (whose usage was confirmed by the Macedonian side) also used rubber bullets or stun grenades [7, p. 1-6; 9].

The crisis stamped its mark on the Croatian-Serbian relations as well. When more than 85,000 third-country nationals had crossed through Croatia by September 2015, Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic officially blamed Serbia and Hungary for this, which, thanks to their carefully thought practices, had directed immigrants to the territory of Croatia. Mutual accusations of hatred between Serbia and Croatia and successively closed Croatian border crossings for trucks transporting Serbian goods so as to force the redirection of subsequent waves of immigrants towards Hungary and Romania, and the embargo imposed on Croatian products in Serbia's response, economically burdened both countries, previously experienced by the effects of the crisis. In 2015, also the Croatia–Slovenia relationships were in turmoil after Croatia had been accused of the uncontrolled passing of refugees to the Slovenian side [10, p. 2-3; 11; 12].

After months of the sharpened rhetoric and the revival of historical animosities on the Western Balkans route, on 25 October 2015, 11 European countries<sup>6</sup> entered the talks in Brussels on coordinating border cooperation and regulating the visa regime. Despite numerous accusations, they succeeded in creating a 17-point plan, which in fact operated until March 2016 when Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia announced the closing of borders in order to eliminate the problem of uncontrolled migration along the Balkan transit route [13, 14].

Finally, it was impossible to close the route, because a lot of immigrants were staying at the border crowded camps, while some of them continued to cross the Balkan route. The paradox of this situation is that the change in the Greek migration policy, the apparent closure of the further section of the route through the Western Balkans, and, particularly, the sealing of the Greek-Macedonian border led to the necessity of circumventing increasingly efficient patrols and rigorous checks along the route preferred by the immigrants. Therefore, a new road emerged, which, by leading through Turkey, does not bypass Bulgaria and Serbia and subsequently allows to reach Western Europe, Central Europe or Scandinavia<sup>7</sup>. The map below (Fig. 2) presents the Balkan route with both the main road and alternative directions taken into consideration.

### 3. The migration crisis – the internal situation of Bulgaria

In June 2012, the official position of Nikola Kazakov, the Chairman of the State Agency for Refugees, clearly indicated that Bulgaria did not need to worry about the migratory pressures as it was not the main target on the Balkan route. However, on account of its belonging to the European community, it was decided that it would support the EU resettlement program by accepting 20 refugees, which Kazakov officially commented as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> The talks were attended by the leaders of Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia.

<sup>7</sup> Another alternative route is the flow from Greece to Italy, which allows the refugees to bypass the Western Balkans. *България. Годишен доклад за наблюдение на границите през 2015 г. Достъп до територия и международна закрила*, [online]. Sofia, София, 30 юли 2016 г., p. 6. Available at: [http://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/documents/reports/special/2015\\_annual\\_report\\_access\\_to\\_territory\\_and\\_asylum\\_procedure\\_bg.pdf](http://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/documents/reports/special/2015_annual_report_access_to_territory_and_asylum_procedure_bg.pdf) [Accessed: 29 October 2017].



**Fig. 2.** The Balkan transit route  
*Source: Own study based on: [15].*

“Regardless of the limited financial possibilities, our country is currently developing a policy of participation in the EU resettlement program to demonstrate the government’s readiness to share responsibility and show solidarity with other Member States involved in the resettlement program and people subjected to resettlement on a global scale” [16].

However, in the literature on the subject, it is acknowledged that in 2012 Bulgaria was not aware of the challenges that one of the poorest EU countries would be forced to cope with only a few months later. The attention of the Bulgarian press was quite rarely focused on events in Syria while ignoring the first signs of the forthcoming migration crisis. At the same time, especially from the summer of 2013, thousands of immigrants systematically arrived in Bulgaria. Then, they were transported to the Harmanli and Ovcha Kupel camps where they were confronted with the terrible conditions of staying in accommodation centers in the territories of the European state. Thus, already in the autumn of 2013, apart from the opposition in Harmanli, also in other Bulgarian camps (previously mentioned Busmantsi or Lyubimets) the first hunger strikes began to flare up against the inhumane treatment of refugees. It turned out, therefore, that the European migration crisis also increasingly reached Bulgaria, which was not and still is not prepared for the surge in the inflow of immigrants. Mass protests in Varna at the beginning of 2013, among others against the actions of the oligarchs, high fees and, on the other hand, low social benefits do not cast any doubts on the fact that Bulgaria has neither financial nor extensive institutional capabilities that would allow massive registration and additional support for newcomers by offering decent accommodation conditions or integration assistance [6, 17].

The first document intended to limit the illegal migration on the territory of Bulgaria was the plan of crisis prevention published by the government in 2013. In addition to the aforementioned planned construction of the wall on the Bulgarian-Turkish border<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the

<sup>8</sup> The route that is especially popular with immigrants leads to Bulgaria through the border with Turkey, which currently affects the cooperation of the states. On the one hand, the Bulgarian politicians emphasize



provision was also made to increase border patrols by another 1,500 people in 2013. Based on the published document, it may be argued that, in principle, Bulgaria's modern migration policy is related to limiting the number of people seeking protection in the territory of the country, as well as the removal of those who illegally crossed the border. The skeptical approach to admission of refugees is also visible in the matter of investing funds transferred to Bulgaria by the European Commission. 160 million euros covered 90% of the cost of the wall construction, while only 3.6 million euros went to the State Agency for Refugees, which was to allocate this amount for the purchase of food. Therefore, no additional funds were foreseen for possible integration programs or further support after granting refugee status [2; 18, p. 4-7].

At the same time, even though a 10% Muslim Turkish minority and a partially Muslim Romani minority, as well as Bulgarian Muslims, namely Pomaks, who converted to Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century live in Bulgaria, the anti-Muslim rhetoric is growing in Bulgaria. After the elections in March 2017, the United Patriot coalition, consisting of a party with clearly nationalist profiles, won 27 seats, thus taking the third place. The result of the last elections reflects the social mood, as the growing negative attitude towards immigrants is observed among the Bulgarian society [19]. Despite the fact that the moods of the Bulgarians remain far from hatred (in spite of attacks on third-country nationals that have already occurred), immigrants are treated as a threat due to their origin, the lack of integration, as well as connecting illegal immigration with terrorist attacks carried out in Europe. Two terrorists participating in a series of attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, as well as a truck driver who killed a Pole before he drove into the crowd of people at the Christmas market in Berlin on December 20, 2016, can be given as examples of immigrants entering Europe from the Balkan route [20, p. 4-10; 21; 22].

The fear of inability to solve the problem of illegal immigration raises the need for the Bulgarians to counteract the effects of the crisis personally. Apart from the fact that it was repeatedly reported that border guards or guards stationed in the Bulgarian centers attacked the third-country nationals, in 2016 the 29-year-old Bulgarian, Dinko Valev, in cooperation with a civic patrol consisting of volunteers, began to organize chases for immigrants, and afterwards published all the incidents on popular social networking sites. His encouraging hatred against people wishing to apply for asylum in Bulgaria, on the one hand, found favor of the society and the government and, most probably, of the Bulgarian Armed Forces, which supported these activities in technical terms with the equipment belonging to them. On the other hand, the man was criticized, among others, by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, while the jihadists, whom he tried to track down among the immigrants reaching Bulgaria across the border with Turkey, offered \$ 50,000 for his death [23, 24].

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the importance of maintaining good-neighborly relations with Turkey, however, on the other hand, the complications arising from the attempt to sign the Turkey-EU readmission agreement are an obstacle to building positive relationships with Bulgaria's strategic partner. The lack of consent of the European Commission to liberalize the visa regime for Turkish citizens resulted in Turkey's threatening remarks regarding opening its borders to the EU and "flooding" the Member States with illegal immigrants, which would directly hit the territory of Bulgaria first. R. Pavlova. *The state of migration deals with Turkey – the view from Bulgaria*, [online]. Available at: <http://detainedinbg.com/blog/2017/04/05/the-state-of-migration-deals-with-turkey-the-view-from-bulgaria/> [Accessed: 12 December 2017]. For more on this subject see: N. Sienko. *Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the context of contemporary migration crisis*. The Voice of Security Awareness. 2017;1(2):31-42.

However, on the other side of the barricade, there are people who, instead of fighting the illegal immigration, decided to make money on it. If it cannot be counteracted, the aim has become to find a way to enable immigrants to safely travel through the country and cross the border with another one, so that it was not possible to be proved, under the Dublin system, which country was to take responsibility for their extradition. According to the testimony of one of the immigrants, he had to pay \$ 6,000 for receiving help in travelling the road from Afghanistan to France. However, it turned out that he had been cheated since the immigrants did not avoid the clash with the Iranian police and only two men from 37 people managed to safely cross the Turkish border, while the 23-year-old Afghan only reached Bulgaria and lost contact with the smuggler. After this incident, he counted on the support from his father, who promised to send him \$ 600, that is an amount that would allow him to reach France with the help of other smugglers, who made contacts with immigrants in a careful way, for example in Internet cafes [25]. The Afghan additionally admitted that Bulgarian smugglers usually offer transport to the border with Serbia. According to other testimonies, immigrants are only led to the borders of individual Balkan states, and after they cross them, they are intercepted by another smuggling network, closely related to the others. The smuggling route begins in Istanbul, and each member of the criminal group is obliged to perform a specific task – some establish contacts with immigrants, are responsible for transport, others look for drivers or are involved in planning the time, direction and route. Nonetheless, beatings and robbery assaults on immigrants often take place, and yet another issue is exorbitant amounts that the smugglers demand. For instance, a 34-year old Eritrean paid \$ 1500 for the route from Greece to neighboring Albania. It is also not optimistic that the problem of smuggling continues to increase as third-country nationals are prepared to pay such fees, willingly using the services of smugglers, especially after media reports on closing the Balkan route. In addition to criminal networks that have been trading with weapons and drugs, the Bulgarian taxis have found an idea of considerable income. A taxi carrying immigrants across the country does not arouse unnecessary suspicions, and it is possible to save about \$ 3,000 for such a service [25].

## Conclusions

The contemporary migration problem of Bulgaria particularly results from its location on the world map. The close proximity of the former Yugoslavia states, which must face the new challenge while being strongly divided, as well as Turkey, which is “juggling” with the migration policy in contacts with the EU, means that much more severe burden of protecting the EU’s external border fell to Bulgaria in 2016.

The cause and effect analysis of changes in the rhetoric and practices towards migratory movements leads to the conclusion that the situation of the EU Member States and other countries located in Europe resembles a system of connected vessels. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the solutions adopted in one country have an impact on the migration policy of the entire region, as well as exerting mutual migration pressure, which stems from the inability to work out harmonized measures. While in the case of Bulgaria, the proximity to Turkey constitutes a sensitive border, the situation in Serbia is affected by solutions adopted in Bulgaria – the systematic transport of immigrants to the Serbian borders, which causes the problem to be naturally passed over the neighboring countries. It was this common dependence visible together with the growing cross-border problem that forced the necessity



to fight against the effects of the migration crisis also on areas (including Bulgaria) that were previously not the “center” of an attractive route to Western Europe or Scandinavia.

The question, therefore, remains how this country struggling with many social and economic problems will continue to secure its borders with non-EU countries. This especially concerns protecting the borders in the south with Turkey, which is the main trafficking area to Bulgaria, and in the west with Macedonia or Serbia, as well as the coastline of the Black Sea in the eastern part of the country. Now, however, there are no clear indications suggesting a change in the migration policy pursued in the Republic of Bulgaria. The afore-mentioned internal problems result, on the one hand, in the lack of solutions for the protection of those who have crossed the Bulgarian border, and, on the other hand, intensify the rather clear anti-immigration rhetoric present in the Bulgarian society.

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### **Author contributions**

The author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Ethical statement**

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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## Biographical note

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### **Bułgarska polityka migracyjna – współczesne wyzwania wzdłuż bałkańskiego szlaku tranzytowego**

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#### **STRESZCZENIE**

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi skondensowaną próbę rozważań dotyczącą współczesnej roli Republiki Bułgarii w kontekście bałkańskiego szlaku tranzytowego oraz wyzwań dla zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa w regionie. Zasadnicze pytanie, na które próbuje odpowiedzieć autorka dotyczy wpływu mechanizmów regulacji przepływu imigrantów wprowadzanych przez poszczególne państwa w bliskim sąsiedztwie Bułgarii, jak również sposobu, w jaki kraj borykający się z wieloma problemami natury społecznej i ekonomicznej zabezpiecza granice przed niekontrolowanym napływem nielegalnej migracji.

#### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

bałkański szlak tranzytowy, polityka migracyjna, europejski kryzys migracyjny, umowa o readmisji UE–Turcja

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