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Essential aspects of psychological work with third countries' citizens in the Special Center for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners – Sofia

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Abstract. *The current report presents the practical experience of the psychologists working with illegal foreigners in Bulgaria in the Special Center for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners /SCTAF/-Sofia. It is focused on the analysis of the specific needs and characteristics of the target group; basic psychological methods and specific techniques of work in the Special center.*

At the SCTAF are accommodated third countries' citizens with imposing coercive administrative measures, for whom there are obstacles for immediate deportation or expulsion from Bulgaria. In this kind of institutions there is tension and negative mood among residents. The reasons for these obstacles are the actual situation of limited movement of people inside the center, the different ethnic group of foreigners forced to live together and the vast cultural differences among them. Sometimes the accommodation is prolonged and the centers are overpopulated, especially in the current situation. Foreigners feel uncertainty about their future life prospects. They are frequently experiencing negative emotions, fantasies and fears. The sense of distrust and suspicion grows and that makes them ready to react defensively and aggressively. In the centers often occur crises situations and riots. That is why the job of the psychologist is dynamic and prevention oriented. Face to face contact with both foreigners and staff is important to be continuous.

Psychological support in SCTAF most often takes the form of individual counseling. It is crucial that the consultant is genuine and empathic. He needs to percept the client as an individual with its own cultural and ethnic characteristics. The process of psychological support is oriented towards finding a personal identity and meaning for the client. According to the feedback we judge that even short-term counseling has a positive effect if the client has felt attention, understanding and concern about his case.

Combating illegal migration is considered as a very serious national problem related to the responsibilities and partnership with the EU commitments in the implementation of common arrangements and national security.

The problem with the migration flow is relatively new for Bulgaria. By 1989 our country had strict security regime of borders and refugee influx practically did not exist. At present, together with the refugee flow, is increasing the number of illegal migrants in the Republic of Bulgaria, particularly in the hinterland. The policy on their return to their countries of origin requires a number of specialized activities. Thus, in the open in 2006 in Sofia Special Center for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAF) Directorate „Migration" – MI, began the placement of third-country nationals with imposed administrative measures for which there are obstacles for their immediate removal from the country, to organize their transportation to the border of the Republic of Bulgaria or their expulsion.

The accommodation of illegal migrants in SCTAF is not a means of punishment, but rather a measure to guarantee the subsequent removal from the country.

The activities of returning to the country of origin shall be carried out in accordance with the Strategic program for integrated return management as part of the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011-2020).

In the last months of 2015 dynamic changes in migratory flows are observed, which affects the process of accommodation and exemption of foreigners from the center. The capacity of the base is exceeded repeatedly and it is necessary to quicken the administrative procedures.

There are essentially two groups of people placed in SCTAF:

1. Citizens who are aiming to get refugee and humanitarian status. Usually they are coming from countries with civil riots and military action. Most of the people are members of incomplete families. Probably they have witnessed scenes of violence, cruelty and murder, including such of their relatives. They have suffered severe mental trauma. These people are considered as a low risk group from the viewpoint of the order in the center.

2. Other groups of foreigners staying illegally:

- ✓ people who have illegally crossed the border of the Republic of Bulgaria;
- ✓ persons who have remained after their permits within the country or after the expiration date of visas;
- ✓ foreigners staying on the territory of the country and for whom Bulgaria has responsibility for the implementation of Regulation EC №343/2003 of the Council of Europe;
- ✓ foreigners who have not left the Republic of Bulgaria in time after the failure to obtain protection under the Law for Asylum and Refugees;
- ✓ foreigners who have committed premeditated crime on the territory of the Republic.

Bulgaria, for which Bulgarian legislation provides more than three years punishment "imprisonment". (Table 1)

Usually illegal migrants accommodated in SCTAF are driven by a desire to find a better standard of living. They have bet all personal resources and are usually oriented to the Western European countries and Bulgaria is only a transit zone for them. In all groups dominate those who hide their identity.

In the current situation, after the war in Syria, most of the residents in SCTAF are presenting themselves as Syrian citizens, waiting to gain favor from the employees of the public administration. According to the dynamics of the world economic and political situation the top nationalities of the accommodated foreigners are also changing (Figure 1, 2, 3).

The migratory pressure is increasing since the middle of 2012 until present. The employees in SCTAF perform their duties in difficult circumstances – the accommodation is permanently beyond the capacity of the center and the process of placement and taking out of foreigners is intensive.

In 2014 are accommodated totally 2728 migrants, 2433 of whom are new arrivals. For comparison in 2013 the accommodated were 2705 and 1579 were new arrivals.

Table 1
Accommodated migrants in SCTAF – Sofia for the period of 2013-2015

Period	Number of accommodated migrants	Outgoing register	Number of transferred to the State Agency for Refugees	Number with coercive administrative measures
2013	2737	2637	1991	581
2014	2767	2925	1510	659
2015	4633	4519	3852	430

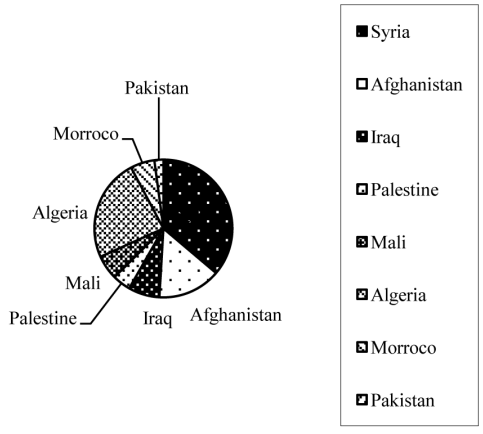


Figure1. Top nationalities accommodated at SCTAF in 2013

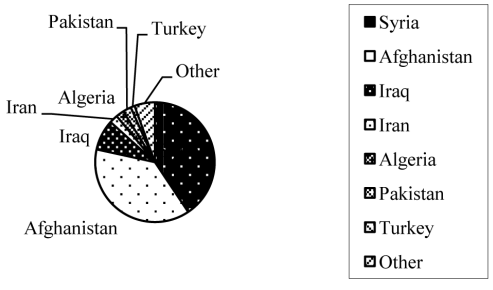


Figure 2. Top nationalities accommodated at SCTAF in 2014

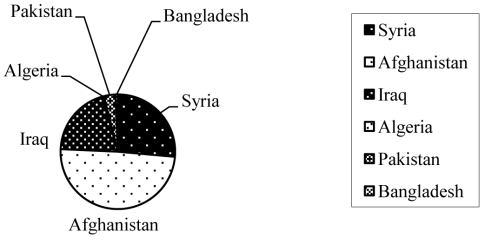


Figure 3. Top nationalities accommodated at SCTAF in 2015

The most significant increase of new arrivals is citizens of Afghanistan (2014 – 920, 2013 – 308). The migrants from Syria for second consecutive year are leading in the number of newly arrivals (2014 – 988, 2013 – 507). The number of accommodated citizens of Iraq is increasing twice (2014 – 201, 2013 – 98) and there is a significant increase in resident citizens of Pakistan (2014 – 55, 2013 – 39).

There is serious reduction of newly arrived citizens of Morocco (2014 – 8, 2013 – 71) and Algeria (2014 – 53, 2013 – 278), as well as representatives from other African counties such as Mali (2014 – 14, 2013 – 278) and Congo (2014 – 4, 2013 – 11).

Another fact that makes impression is that it is reducing the numbers of countries from which originate the accommodation. In 2013 the new arrivals in SCTAF were from 60 countries and in 2014 they are from 43 countries.

Foreigners accommodated in SCTAF are experiencing high level of mental stress due to several factors:

1. A state of helplessness experienced as a result of mental trauma:

– Many of the residents are faced with serious traumatic events in their home countries. They are often forced to leave their homes. Children have witnessed parental concerns and common life instability. Minors even don't have a memory of a period of stability.
– A source of additional stress is the traveling to a country in which to be housed. It may have passed months of travel and life-threatening hazards. During this period it is possible the children to have lost their parents due to accident or they might be delivered into the hands of smugglers, as they would have a better chance of getting refugee status. There is increasingly common trend the minors to be accompanied by an adult in anticipation of friendly treatment. These people fall within specified group of vulnerable persons.
– The arrival in Bulgaria can be a cause of additional difficulties, since most of them remain long in the center while awaiting during the procedures of obtaining status. This period is considered as a time of "re-traumatization" due to the problems encountered on site. Children may need prematurely to enter the role of adults, which again rises the mental stress.

2. A lack of clarity on the situation and on the prospect for the future – this vacuum and

the inability to control or influence the situation brings acute distress. The absence of information is replaced with dark fantasies and fears for the future. These circumstances are escalating the sense of mistrust, suspicion and preparedness to react.

3. Concealing identity – most foreign citizens don't present identity documents. They adopt other personality and this also provides high internal stress.

4. Dynamics of mental states – immediately after arrest among the foreigners are observed reactions of numbness and helplessness. Gradually these states are replaced by oppositional behavior and anger, which are arising by the mismatch from their expectations for admission in an EU country and the reality. The indefiniteness and uncertainty about the future, combined with psychological pressure from exceeded capacity of the accommodation center, poor living conditions and extremely limited resources are a prerequisite for strengthening the tension and discontent.

5. Conflicts between different groups – for people waiting for refugee status prospects are better and this causes resentment in the group of foreigners who have refusal for protection and humanitarian status. Moreover belonging to different ethnic, cultural and religious groups is often an occasion for clashes.

In this type of institutions there is a tension and negative background mood among residents which often leads to crisis conditions, and sometimes riots. That is why the work of the psychologist is dynamic, prevention-based and require continuous active contacts with foreigners and employees working at SCTAF.

The job responsibilities of a psychologist at SCTAF are concerning:

1. Responsibilities about accommodated foreigners:

- ✓ Prevention of stress and aggressive behavior among residents;
- ✓ Performing psychological interventions in crisis individual states and suicide attempts;
- ✓ Participation in the organization of administrative and social activities with residents who are subject to forced removal from the country, depending on the specific need;
- ✓ Consultative and therapeutic work;
- ✓ Diagnostics and making analysis of the trends within accommodated communities.

2. Responsibilities about the staff:

- ✓ Methodological support for the activities of interviewers regarding the mental status of foreigners in SCTAF;
- ✓ Supporting interviewers in the process of studying the accommodated, their groups and communities in the implementation of appropriate corrective consultative work;
- ✓ Advising all officers to establish correct approaches to foreigners;
- ✓ Psychological treatment and training of staff on the prevention of occupational stress;
- ✓ Individual and family counseling.

The requests to provide psychological support for the accommodated foreigners are mostly on their own initiative and on the recommendation of an interviewer, a commander of division, a medical officer, a police inspector or other employee of Directorate "Migration". The form in which the help is performed most often is the individual consultation. Empathy and respect to the client's individual, cultural and ethnic characteristics are crucial.

Accommodated foreigners seeking help from psychologist might be divided in several groups:

- People suffering from increased somatic symptoms – insomnia, headache, fatigue, lack of appetite, exacerbation of chronic physical illnesses.
- People with administrative demands – asking for information about their case, date of deportation, response to an application to the Directorate "Migration" etc.
- People with social demands – complaining about living conditions in the center, lack of privacy; conflicting and thefts.

The psychological symptoms of stress, regardless of the root cause, most often aredepressed mood, crying, sadness, loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, hostile behavior, fear that something bad is going to happen, insom-

nia, nightmares, irritability, angry outbursts, threats and implementing self injuries.

The main problems which are considered in the process of consultations might be generally separated into three groups:

– Problems of the past – death of loved ones, home loss, job/career loss, loss of refugee status, exposure to traumatic situations, sorrow for the relatives, anxiety that family expectations can't be justified;
– Problems of the present, relating to the adaptation in SCTAF – language, climate, culture, conditions of limited movement, food, rules and conditions of internal order in the center, financial difficulties; lack of frequent phone or online communication with relatives;
– Issues related to the future – a gap between expectations and reality, unclear prospects, life plans and fears. The foreigners often are experiencing an existential crisis due to unfulfilled plans for self-realization in Western Europe and required return to their home country.

Practice shows that successful for all groups seeking support is person–centered approach, which includes being open to experience, being trusting and trustworthy, being creative and compassionate. In such psychological environment the client feels deeply understood and accepted, having unconditional positive regard.

We also practice art therapy, psychodrama and other specific techniques helping the process of rationalization and integration of events in the life story of the client.

During the counseling process are important:

– Empathy and active listening – addressing the situation from the viewpoint of the client, reflecting his feelings and allowing him to vent the tension;
– Sensitivity about signs of anxiety or rising tension during the process;
– Tolerance to differences in culture, values and views on world;
– Patience – the procedural rules need to be updated frequently, because our laws, expectations and behavioral standards do not carry the same meaning for foreigners;
– Support and positive feedback to recover self-respect and pride which emigrant life took from them;
– Expanding their view of the current situation, summarizing, working with metaphors, putting the focus on short- and medium-term goals.

We use the client's strengths like sense of humor, communication skills, life skills and interests. We try to support him find personal meaning of the situation.

Many of the accommodated foreigners understand for a first time in SCTAF what is the function of the psychologist (often unpopular in the Arab and African culture) and what is the framework of the counseling session. Sessions are usually short-lived, orientated to stabilization of the emotional state of the client. Individual attention and concern brings positive effect which is shown in the received feedback.

It is important to attend the fact that most of the accommodated foreigners seeking support are uneducated. In these cases, the most appropriate method is to reflect the expressed feelings. The foreigner is usually soothing, when he feels no danger of imposed values and models that he objectively can not internalize. Even only active listening in these situations is a prerequisite for reducing the tension and transforms into a basis for future work, positive change and personal growth.

It is important to keep in mind that sometimes unconditional positive attitude demonstrated by the psychologist makes the clients become capricious, aggressive or arouses their desire for domination and manipulation. In such cases it may gradually shift to more directive techniques, within the humanistic approach.

The specific of consulting foreign women is determined mostly by work with long-time hidden feelings caused by trauma - physical, emotional abuse, torture and degrading treatment. Women experiencing strong fears express uncertainty and guilt. It is especially difficult during the first contact. Psychologist is required to withhold long painful silence of trauma experienced by the woman and to reflect her feelings. Sometimes we need to

educate to promote the adoption of European approaches to this kind of traumatic experiences. Most effort and time in the consultation process is required for empathic connection and generating trust.

Consulting children is also specific because they have difficulty explaining their trauma, display it by clinging to their mothers, trembling and crying. They may also show their trauma through play and inappropriate behaviours for their age like thumb-sucking, nail-biting, bedwetting, frightened facial expressions, fear of darkness, and little social interaction. According to our experience, parents may not recognize possible trauma, because they mistakenly assume "the child wasn't looking when it happened" or "the child was too young to understand."

Children between 6 and 11 years old usually become anxious, depressed, angry, and refuse to participate in different proposed activities. Others experience sleeping difficulties, nightmares, fear of the dark, and physical ailments like vomiting, headaches or stomach aches. This age group is three times more likely to suffer from PTSD than adolescents, because they are at a younger stage of development. Most endangered are those who have lost family and community connections.

There is a tendency to be accommodated incomplete families with members of the wider family (children with their uncles and grandparents). This choice is made before their departure for Europe. Usually children are used as a factor causing favourable attitude towards everyone in the family. This fact affects the consultative work also, because the counselor lacks adequate information for the relations within the family.

Another type of psychological intervention is conflict mediation and mastering protest behavior. Most often, participants in such situations have antisocial personality traits. They express manipulative behavior, ignore norms and requirements, they have very low threshold of frustration, easy outburst of aggression, lack of remorse, guilt and responsibility, indifferent to the caused injuries. Usually angry foreigners demonstrate infantile reactions – slamming, crying, kicking, shoving, due to failure to achieve desired goals. The presence of a psychologist, acceptance of feelings and firm adherence to the order and rules in SCTAF are important for the successfully resolve of such crisis situations.

The psychologist has a responsible role in the conduct of crisis intervention of foreigners, commited or attempted self-harm and suicide. The psychologist negotiates, using active listening and empathy, gains rapport and finally influences the destructive behavior. Specific in such situations is the need of creative ideas to help change attitudes.

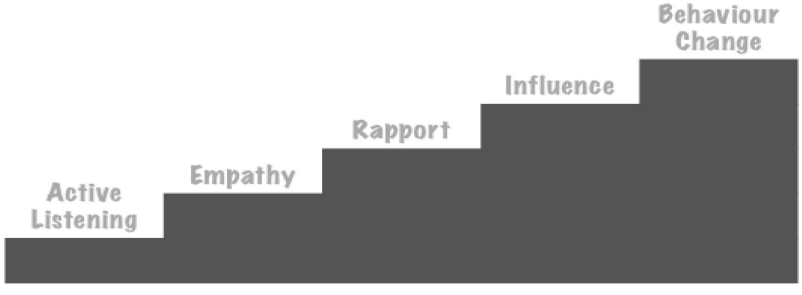


Figure 4. Behavioral change stairway model

Notes: Some parts of this article were presented at several forums last year. For the purpose of the International Networking Conference "Emigration and Immigration on the Balkans in the focus of Political Psychology" we have updated statistics and imported new versions regarding the current situation in SCTAF. The description of the psychological approaches remains the same.

Another complicating circumstances surrounding the work of psychologist in SCTAF is the need to use an interpreter, since a large part of the residents speak only their native language. The specific thing is precise preliminary agreement with the translator and his acquaintance with the specifics of the counseling process. Sometimes professional translators are not enough and this requires the use of an unprofessional one – from the group of residents who speak Bulgarian. During the conversation, it is important to monitor nonverbal reactions of the accommodated who show if they are feeling comfortable or not, whether the message has reached them.

The work of psychologist in SCTAF needs to be active, in constant contact with various units and preventive-oriented. It is important to synchronize the team interaction and to maintain a normal atmosphere among residents.

The largest number of employees in SCTAF with who the psychologist interacts are policemen from „Security units". Psychologists contribute to the improvement of specific interactions in complex work environment, facilitating the development of visual and auditory orientation. Support shall take the form of individual and family counseling for people in the center.

The role of the psychologist has proved to be essential for crisis management among residents in the center, for overcoming the stress among staff, but there is no effective program to exchange good practices with other professionals working in the field. We need to build a network for cooperation with government institutions and NGOs in order to implement more adequate approaches to specific work with third countries.

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