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THE CURRENT MIGRANT AND REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE: REFUGEE RECEPTION CENTERS IN SOUTH-EAST BULGARIA

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Abstract: *In this paper, we analyzed the current refugee crisis in Europe by discussing its main characteristics within the European context. A comparison between the different routes in Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and in general in South-Eastern Europe was done. As the main research problem, we focused on Bulgaria as an entry gate for the arriving immigrants and we presented the most recent statistics related to the illegal entries in the country. Among our objectives was the analysis of the current problems at the reception centers in the South-Eastern part of Bulgaria. An important part of our methodology consisted of direct interviews performed with the local and immigrant population at the center of Harmanli. The key results of our analysis showed that despite the attempts on the part of the officials for successful integration of the immigrants, there were still important needs for improvement. In conclusion, we suggested that the use of good practices from other countries with experience in migration policies might contribute to better integration and improvement of the mutual respect between local and migrant populations.*

Keywords: *European Refugee Crisis; Illegal Migration; Bulgaria; Refugee Reception Center Harmanli*

INTRODUCTION

The recent migration crisis is one of the major challenges for Europe and the World after the Second World War. There were 19.5 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2014. The war in Syria caused over 4 million refugees, accompanied by the arrival of asylum seekers, reaching 663.000 in 2014 and almost 1.005.500 in December of 2015 (IOM 2015). 970.000 refugees arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean in that year. The major part of them has reached Greece and Italy, while Spain, Cyprus, and

Malta have been less affected. Another 30.000 arrived in Bulgaria from Turkey by land (IOM 2015). At the end of 2016, more than 3 million Syrian refugees lived in Turkey, apart from the rest of the refugees and immigrants coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, etc. Most of them were willing to continue their route to Western Europe (Bitoulas 2015; UNHCR-Turkey 2016). This is a challenging situation for Bulgaria, which has a common border with Turkey.

The impact of the massive movement of refugees to Europe in 2015 and 2016 resulted in a growing refugee population and the number of asylum applications processed during 2017. The refugee population in Germany increased by 45% in the period 2015-2017. The country continued to receive the most claims from Syrians - 49,000 in 2017, although in 2016 their number was higher -266,300. In 2016, Greece had the second-largest number of received claims (16,300) followed by Austria (7,300), France (5,800), Sweden (4,600), and Spain (4,300) (UNHCR 2017). In 2017, Lebanon continued to host the largest number of refugees in relation to its population. One of six people was a refugee under the responsibility of UNHCR. During that year and in 2018 for the third and fourth consecutive time, Turkey hosted the largest number of refugees, with 3.5 and 3.7 million people, respectively (UNHCR 2017, 2018).

Syria was the most common country of origin with 117,100 new claims in 104 countries in 2017, mostly in Europe. Afghanistan contributed with 107,500 claims in 80 countries. Turkey received the most claims from Afghan refugees in 2018 with 53,000 registered, followed by Greece (1,800), which marks a significant increase compared to 7,500 in 2017. A similar increase of the Afghan claims was seen in France, from 6,600 in 2017 to 10,300 in 2018. In contrast, there has been an important decline in Germany from 127,000 claims registered in 2016 to 16,400 in 2017 and 9,900 in 2018 (UNHCR 2017; 2019). The situation in 2020 shows that around 8,700 people in need of international protection were resettled from non-EU countries to the EU Member States, which is about 59% less than in 2019 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Syrian was the main nationality with about 53% of people resettled within these countries and mainly in Germany. Spain's refugee statistics for 2020 reports 103,679 people, which is an increase of 79.53% compared to 2019 (CEAR 2021). Data of 2021, concerning the number of illegal border crossings at the EU's external borders during Jan-Sep 2021, show that they were about 47% more than in 2019 when this number was 91,000 (FRONTEX 2021). In September there were 23,630 illegal border crossings, which is about 40% more compared to September 2020 and 17% more compared to September 2019. The most important routes were the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan ones. About 47,620 illegal border crossings were registered in the first nine months of the year on the Central Mediterranean route. This is an 87% rise compared to the same period of 2020. Only in September, there were 5,670 illegal border crossings, mainly from immigrants coming from Tunisia, Bangladesh, and Egypt, which is about 33% more compared to September 2020.

The statistics concerning the Western Balkan route counts about 40,200 illegal border crossings, during the first nine months of 2021, which is about 117% more compared to the same period of 2020. Only in September 2021, there were 10,400 illegal crossings, which is about 112% more compared to September 2020.

Concerning the Eastern borders, the recent increase of immigrants, mainly coming from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, at the borders between Belarus and Poland and Lithuania shows a dramatic situation of accumulation of immigrants between the borders. Only in July 2021, their number reaches 2900 at the border between Lithuania and Belarus, while in September Lithuanian authorities registered 20 irregular arrivals. Similar and even worse is the situation at the border between Poland and Belarus, where in September, Polish authorities registered 28 illegal border crossings. In mid-November 2021, the situation at the border between Poland and Belarus has escalated due to the presence of the Polish army and the accumulation of more than 2,000 immigrants at the Belarus part of the border with very limited access to humanitarian aid. Even more, there were several border clashes at the Bruzgi-Kuźnica border crossing between both countries (Chance *et al.* 2021). Since the beginning of 2021, more than 34,000 attempts have been registered, of which 6,000 in November, nearly 17,300 in October, 770 in September, and more than 3,500 in August 2021 when the crisis began (FRONTEX 2021).

Regarding the Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes for the period January-September 2021, 14,100 illegal border crossings were detected on the Western Mediterranean route which is 22% more than the same period in 2020. Only in September 2021, the number of detentions amounted to 3,487, which is about 20% more compared to September 2020. The situation on the Eastern Mediterranean route for the period January-September 2021 shows 13,190 detentions, which is about 17% less compared to the same period of 2020. However, in September 2021, 1,590 illegal crossings have been registered on this route, which is about 18% more compared to September 2020.

The majority of the immigrants from the Western Mediterranean route come from Algeria, Morocco, and sub-Saharan Africa, while those from the Eastern Mediterranean route come from Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Finally, the Western African route registered 11,700 illegal border crossings during January-September 2021, which is about 93% more compared to the same period of 2020. The majority of the immigrants on this route come from Sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco. The refugee crisis and its effect in several countries have been the focus of numerous research and policy analyses (Ayoub and Shaden 2014; Bardens, Melanie, and Smith 2014; Ostrand 2015; Koroutchev 2016). Many attempts have been also done concerning the question of livelihood opportunities for the refugee population by using lessons from past practices (Harild, Christensen, and Zetter 2015; Jacobsen and Fratzke 2016).

More recent publications have discussed in general the journalism, public opinion, and policymaking in Europe and those related to the migration phenomena (Dell'Orto and Wetzstein 2019), the building migration partnership in the Mediterranean (Lixi 2017), the relationship between development and migration (Fratzke and Salant 2018), the role of the European education to boost migrant inclusion (Ahad and Benton 2018), the German experience in the field of integration (Bruecker, Jaschke, and Kosyakova 2019) or the Covid-19 consequences for the migration after 2020 (Benton *et al.* 2021; Segeš Frelak, Chirita, and Mananashvili 2021; Koroutchev 2021) among others.

BULGARIA AS A TRANSIT COUNTRY FOR THE IMMIGRANTS

The route of migrants through the European part of Turkey has two itineraries. One is across the Maritsa River to Greece and the other is by land to Bulgaria. In recent months, they have used to cross those parts of the Bulgarian border where the fence has been destroyed. Migrant pressure is currently intensifying due to the difficult situation in Turkey. The country is experiencing economic difficulties, and Turkish society is intolerant of the influx of migrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The official statistics offered by the Bulgarian Border Police (BBP 2021) show an important increase of immigrants in recent times, mainly due to the illegal crossing of immigrants from Afghanistan after August 2021 (Figure 1).

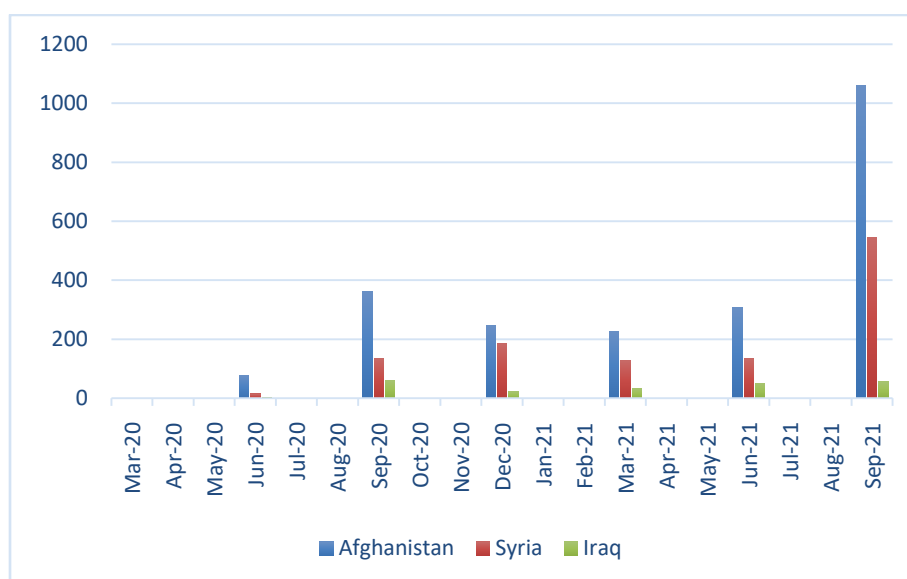


Figure 1: Detained Illegal Immigrants at the Bulgarian's Borders and Inside the Country during the Period March 2020 – September 2021 (Source: BBP 2021)

Following the statistics, the majority of the detained immigrants are at the western border between Bulgaria and Serbia (Figure 2).

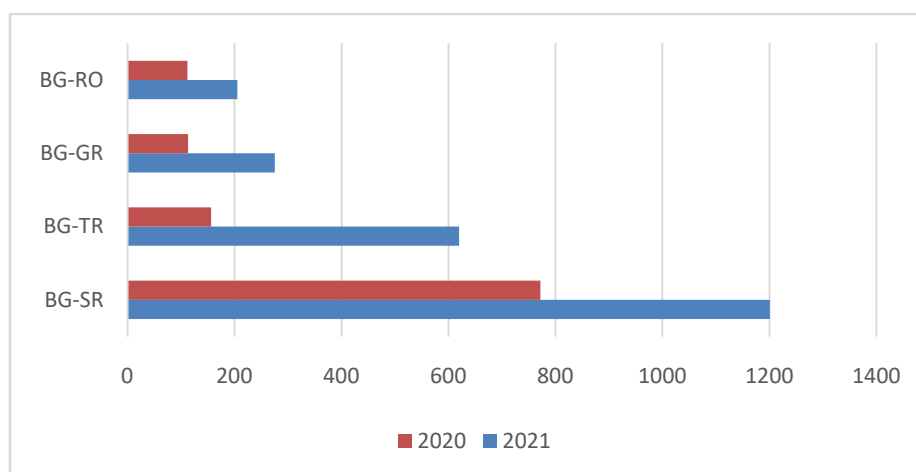


Figure 2: Detained Illegal Immigrants at the Bulgarian Borders with Neighboring Countries in 2020 and 2021 (Source: BBP 2021)

The distribution of the accommodated immigrants in the Bulgarian refugee's centers during 2020 and 2021 is represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Capacity, Accommodation, and Percentage of Filling of the Centers during January-September 2020 and 2021 (Source: BBP 2021)

Capacity	Accommodated	% of Filling	Accommodated External
2021-5160	1940	37,6	306
2020-5160	813	15,8	116

The above accommodations according to citizenship in 2020 and 2021 are represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of the Accommodated Immigrants According to their Citizenship during January-September 2020 and 2021 (Source: BBP 2021)

Citizenship	Number (2021 vs. 2020)	% Tot. Number (2021 vs. 2020)
Syria	1,206 vs. 425	62.2 vs. 52.3
Afghanistan	547 vs. 240	28.2 vs. 29.5
Iraq	64 vs. 61	3.3 vs. 7.5
Others	123 vs. 87	6.3 vs. 10.7

Finally, Table 3 shows the number of accepted and left immigrants from the Bulgarian refugee's centers during January-September 2020 and 2021.

Table 3: Accepted, Left, and Left with Protection Granted Immigrants during January-September 2020 and 2021 (Source: BBP 2021)

	Accepted	Left	Left with Protection Granted
Since Beginning 2021	5,795	4,219	928
Since Beginning 2020	1,438	859	315

In the following figures, one can see the proportion of the immigrants seeking protection in Bulgaria according to their gender (Figure 3) and educational background (Figure 4) (AREF 2021).

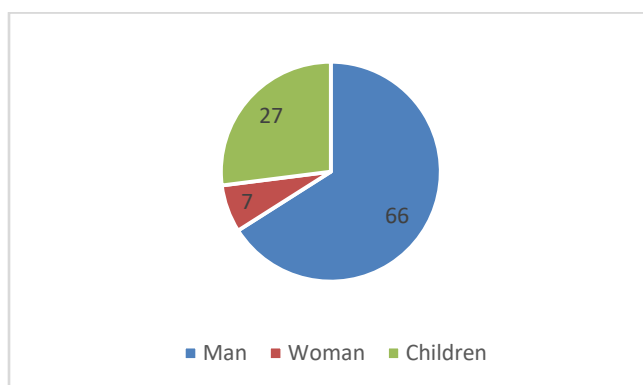


Figure 3: Percentage of Immigrants Seeking Protection in September 2021 According to their Gender (Source: AREF 2021)

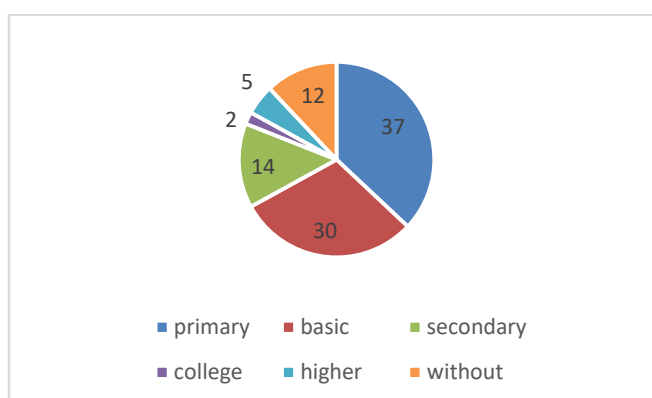


Figure 4: Percentage of the Immigrants Seeking Protection in September 2021 According to their Educational Background (Source: AREF 2021)

It is interesting to see the evolution of the requested and implemented transfers of immigrants from Bulgaria since January 2020. In Figure 5 one can see how these numbers have changed during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. From April 2020 until May 2021, no transfers have been done. After May 2021, the number of requested transfers according to Dublin's regulation has substantially increased. However, the number of implemented transfers is still very low (Figure 5).

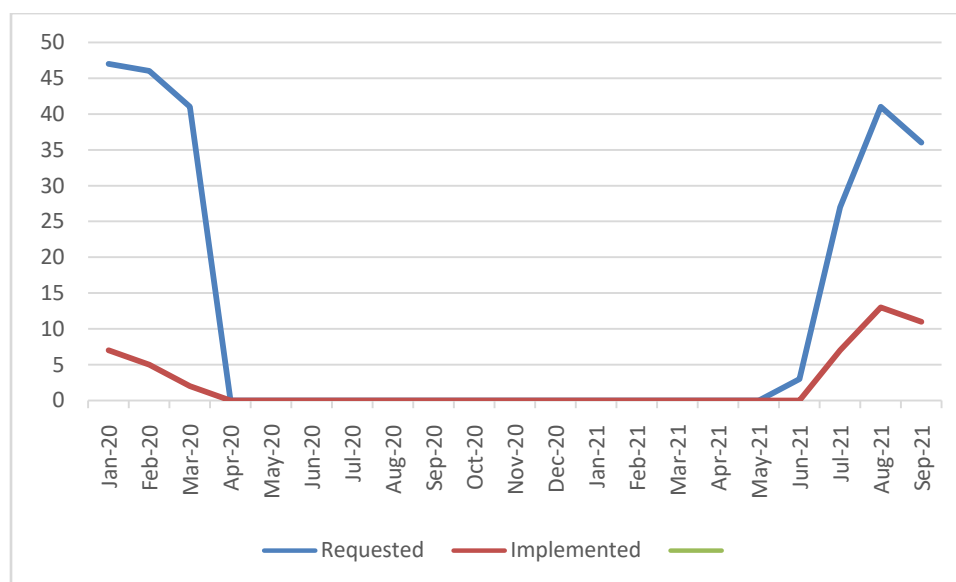


Figure 5: Requested and Implemented Transfers According to the Dublin's Regulation during the Period January 2020-September 2021 (Source: AREF 2021)

REGISTRATION AND RECEPTION CENTERS IN SOUTH-EAST BULGARIA: ON THE WAY TO WESTERN EUROPE

According to the official information from the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers, the Registration and Reception Centers (RRC) have the major duty to organize the reception and temporary accommodation of the immigrants who have applied for international protection; make arrangements for issuing identity documents; provide food, social, medical and psychological assistance to the foreigners accommodated in the centers; ensure the age assessment procedures of unaccompanied minors who have applied for international protection, organizes the cooperation and exchange of information in connection with the administrative proceedings under the Law on Asylum and Refugees between the Agency and other state authorities; proceed on the applications for family reunification of foreigners who were granted international protection, etc. (AREF 2021). The reception centers in South-Eastern Bulgaria, such as those in Harmanli, Pastrogor, and Lyubimets are on the way of the immigrants coming from Turkey in their route to Western Europe and mainly

Germany. According to the latest data from October 2021, a total of 1,132 people are housed in the Reception Center for Refugees in Harmanli, mostly from Syria and Iraq. In the Transit Center 'Pastrogor', almost all of the 212 foreigners accommodated there as of October 2021 were from Afghanistan. A closed type accommodation for temporary accommodation of foreigners has been opened in Lyubimets, where in October 2021, 530 people, mostly citizens of Afghanistan (359) and Syria (114) have been accommodated (BNR 2021).

THE RECEPTION CENTER IN HARMANLI

During the first 6 months of 2021, the number of immigrants in Harmanli Reception Center has increased almost five times. They are mainly coming from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Slavova 2021). Despite this number, only 18% of the capacity of the Center was occupied in July 2021. From 1 to 28 July, 715 people sought protection, and in June there were 579. The increase is typical for the warm months of the year. In May, there were 286 foreigners seeking protection, in April (564), in January (340) (Semerdzhieva 2021). However, this number increased continuously and in September 2021, about 40% of the capacity of the centers for the accommodation of migrants was filled. Harmanli has 1,200 migrants seeking humanitarian status, with a capacity of more than 2,700. Illegal migrants detained on the border with Turkey are placed in Harmali Reception Center under mandatory quarantine in closed centers. They also have full medical examinations there. Their health condition is also checked when they are transferred to the accommodation centers of the Refugee Agency. More than 50% of the residents there have been vaccinated against Covid-19 and the number of cases this year is just a few (Petrova 2021).

As a general trend, in the last months, the number of immigrants who arrived in Harmanli Reception Center was more than those who left the Center. This created some anxiety between the local populations, despite the attempts of the immigrants to integrate to a different culture and the efforts from the locals to be more tolerant towards people who have been forced to leave their home countries due to the war or to economic reasons. At the end of October 2021, there were demonstrations of the local population against the immigrants at the RRC Harmanli asking for a closed refugee center and a stricter regime for foreigners. The main complaints were related to the unsecured nightlife and the dirty streets of Harmanli due to the foreigners. Moreover, women and young girls complained of being constantly subjected to sexual intents and verbal aggression by migrants (Subev 2021).

The interviews performed by the authors with immigrants and the local population at the end of October and the beginning of November 2021 confirm the atmosphere of strong tension in the town. The interviewed local people expressed their everyday difficulties when struggling to make ends meet, the lack of economic

perspectives, the current political and health crisis, related to the absence of government, and the peak of the fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, they were concerned about the safety of the Bulgarian population in Harmanli due to the presence of immigrants in the city and the absence of integration of the foreigners to the main traditions and established order. Due to this unsecured atmosphere, the local people preferred to avoid and contact refugees. Similar to the immigrants, they were reserved about talking.

The general perception when interviewing the immigrants was the lack of trust in the local population due to a recent conflict in a city's shop. They even found it very strange that Bulgarian people wanted to contact them for the interviews. It was very hard to speak to them about the reason why they left and what their aim is. They did not want to go further into details. So they told it in a very short way. Even more, they don't speak good English and the communication was through the Google translator application. All of them had a non-realistic view of Europe, mainly obtained from movies and people who have been there and have returned after earning money.

The authors have contacted several immigrants to understand their story, aims, and how they perceive their stay at the Harmanli Center. The main characteristics from these interviews are briefly presented below:


- Ab. (24 years old man) immigrated because of the dramatic situation in Syria and the hard time in his village, where he was a shepherd. He wants to travel to Germany because as he heard from others, the life there would be better.
- Ur. (29 years old man) worked as a massage therapist, but he had no perspectives because of the war. He had studied some traditional styles of massage in Aleppo, Syria. The knowledge, he gave from his parents, was about energy therapy and massages. As in the case of Ab, traveling for Germany, he is expecting to have a better life there.
- Zh. (22 years old man) immigrated to join a family who is already in France, close to Marseille. They have some restaurants there and he could work. In his home in Syria, he doesn't find a way to deal with the poverty developed by the war.
- Ad. (33 years old man) is an electrician and a father of two children. He was in search of a safer place for his family. When the war broke out in Darfur, Sudan, his uncles were brutally killed and he was forced to run away from the civil war so he could save the life of his wife and children. He was previously in three other refugee camps in better conditions in terms of provision and medical care compared to the Harmanli Center. He shared sadly that the locals considered them as carriers of viruses and illness.
- As. (24 years old man) is a teacher of mathematics. He escaped from the civil war in Aleppo, Syria with the hope of finding new opportunities in life. He was still recovering from the psychological stress of having been a witness of bloodshed, murders, and heavily injured people. He had to find shelter and support at the

border with Syria before he arrived in the camp in Harmanli. He was thankful for the material base and emotional support he received there. He took the role of teacher for the children in the camp and he educated them voluntarily. He initiated classes in the manner of informal education.

- (28 years old man), a farmer, and his mother M. (48 years old) left Afghanistan three years ago. Their village was attacked and he had to flee his home with his mother. They crossed the border illegally and met many benevolent people who gave them shelter and food. He and his mother missed their village and the work on the farm. They felt very concerned about the near future and the way other people from different cultures will accept them. They shared they feel sometimes bored, isolated, and meaningless because of the lack of interaction and activity in job and work.

From the above testaments, one can easily see that there are not enough integration policies in Harmanli, which can permit to reach a better climate and better use of the experience and knowledge from both parts. Actually, with the support of IOM, SAR, and Harmanli Municipality, there were several events to get closer to the local and immigrant population such as the Bulgarian traditional dance workshop (2021), football tournaments for children and adults, Graffiti Fest Harmanli, the celebration of the World Refugee Day, the presentation of the cultures of Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan (2020) or the Global Migration Film festival in previous years (IOM Bulgaria 2021). It seems however that these efforts are not enough for better integration of the refugees and it is desirable to adopt new politics of integration based on best practices from other countries and regions.

CONCLUSION

By using data from the Bulgarian Border Police and other official institutions, we discussed how the refugee crisis affects currently Bulgaria in terms of illegal border crossing and the migrant profile. Our attention was mainly concentrated on the Refugees Reception Centers in the South-Eastern part of the country, which is on the road of the illegal immigrants coming from Turkey towards Western Europe. We have performed several interviews with the local and immigrant population in Harmanli, where the biggest reception center for refugees is situated. Our analysis shows that despite the attempts on the part of the officials for successful integration of the immigrants in that reception center, there are still important needs for improving the relationship between the local and immigrant population in Harmanli. We conclude that good practices from other countries, which have extensive experience with immigrants could also be applied in this case. 

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Statement on the welfare of animals:

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Informed consent:

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