News



Pope Francis stands next to Bulgarian President Rumen Radev during a May 5 welcoming ceremony in the square outside the presidential palace in Sofia, Bulgaria. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis exhorted Bulgarians May 5 not to ignore the plight of refugees who are living in their country, telling political leaders that the nation, which is leading the world in losing population to emigration, should understand migrants' desires for a "dignified life."

Opening a two-day visit to the Balkan nation with a speech outside the presidential palace in the capital of Sofia, the pontiff said he wished to "respectfully suggest" that Bulgarians "not close your eyes, your hearts, or your minds … to those who knock at your door."

The pope ended his discourse, addressed to President Rumen Radev and hundreds of the country's politicians, by asking that God bless the nation and "keep her in peace and ever hospitable."

Francis is visiting Bulgaria, which is located north of Greece and south of Romania, through May 7 on the first leg of a two-country visit that also includes a 10-hour stopover in newly renamed North Macedonia.

The status of refugees is expected to be a central focus for the visit. Bulgaria has hosted tens of thousands of mainly Middle Eastern refugees fleeing violence who have come into the country through its eastern neighbor of Turkey.

The European Commission, the European Union's executive branch, has expressed concern about the living conditions for migrants in Bulgaria, which is a part of the 28-member block, and sent a letter of formal notice in November for non-compliance with EU law over the issue.

In one sign of the tensions on the matter, Francis is scheduled to visit a refugee camp on the outskirts of Sofia May 7 that Bulgaria closed at the end of last year. It appears the government will be transferring some refugees back just to see the pontiff.

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Bulgaria is a nation of about 7.1 million people. U.N. data indicates the country is losing citizens at the fastest rate in the world, projecting a population of 5.4 million

in 2050.

Beyond issues of migration, the pope's first day in Bulgaria also touched on ecumenical issues, as Francis met with Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarch Neophyte and visited the patriarchal cathedral.

In an address to Neophyte and other Bulgarian Orthodox bishops, the pontiff called for Catholics and Orthodox to practice an ecumenism "of the poor" and "of mission."

Although there continues to be formal separation between the two traditions, Francis said they are called to "journey and act together ... particularly by serving the poorest and most neglected of our brothers and sisters."

The Bulgarian Orthodox estimate a membership in the country of about 6.5 million. Relations with the Catholic Church have been strained, as the Bulgarians are the only Orthodox community that have decided not to participate in the most recent meetings of the official Catholic-Orthodox dialogue.

Neophyte did not take part in Francis' visit to the patriarchal cathedral, delegating a senior metropolitan to accompany the pontiff instead.



Pope Francis is pictured May 5 with deputy chief Mufti of Bulgaria, Birali Mumun, and other religious leaders after praying the "Regina Coeli" prayer in Alexander Nevsky Square in Sofia, Bulgaria. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis is the second pope to visit Bulgaria, following John Paul II in 2002. Although the nation has a population of about 7.1 million, the Vatican estimates there are only about 68,000 Catholics.

The pope's schedule May 6 will be more focused on the small Catholic community. After undertaking a morning visit to the refugee camp, he will fly about 40 minutes east to the town of Rakovski, which holds the highest population of Catholics.

Francis will celebrate a First Communion Mass and meet with families, priests and religious there before heading back to Sofia for the night. He is then to visit North Macedonia en route back to Rome May 7.

The Balkan trip is the pope's 29th abroad since his election in March 2013. He is to return to the region in June to visit Romania. Other trips on the pontiff's schedule this year include the African countries of Madagascar, Mozambique and Mauritius in September, and Japan in November.

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This story appears in the **Francis in Bulgaria and North Macedonia** feature series. View the full series.