

Bulgaria News

Advocacy Report May & June 2024



Medical Volunteers
International



Medical Solidarity
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AIM OF THE REPORT

The following report provides an overview of the situation in Bulgaria concerning asylum seekers, asylum holders, people on the move and vulnerable communities. This first instalment of advocacy reports mainly focuses on the general political climate in Bulgaria to create an understanding on national and international politics' influence on migration policies in the country.

The report draws from field notes from the period May to June 2024 but also references sources like testimonies and observations as well as online research of articles, newspapers and public testimonies before that time to give a more coherent overview. A lot of information was shared through conversations with local actors in Bulgaria.

It touches on systematic pushback practices and police brutality, which were and still are common on the Turkish-Bulgarian border. Border surveillance and the governmental enforcement of the so-called "border security" has been recently boosted by EU funds for the Bulgarian border police.

This report aims to draw attention to the needs of people by illustrating the condition people on the move face on their way trying to seek safety in Europe. Secondly, this report introduces the new mission in Sofia and our work on site

Additionally, it explores the conditions on the migration routes leading to Bulgaria and highlights unequal treatment of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian migrants.

Future publications will focus on health issues and access to medical services in Bulgaria as operations will mainly be directed to the improvement of healthcare access and addressing challenges faced by refugee communities.

We - as a new project in Sofia - are highly dependent on well-established NGOs already operating in Sofia and Bulgaria as a whole. Our aim is to establish good cooperation between local actors and us to enhance support services. Since May 2024 we are present in Sofia and aim to help with medical needs and facilitate people's access to the healthcare system.

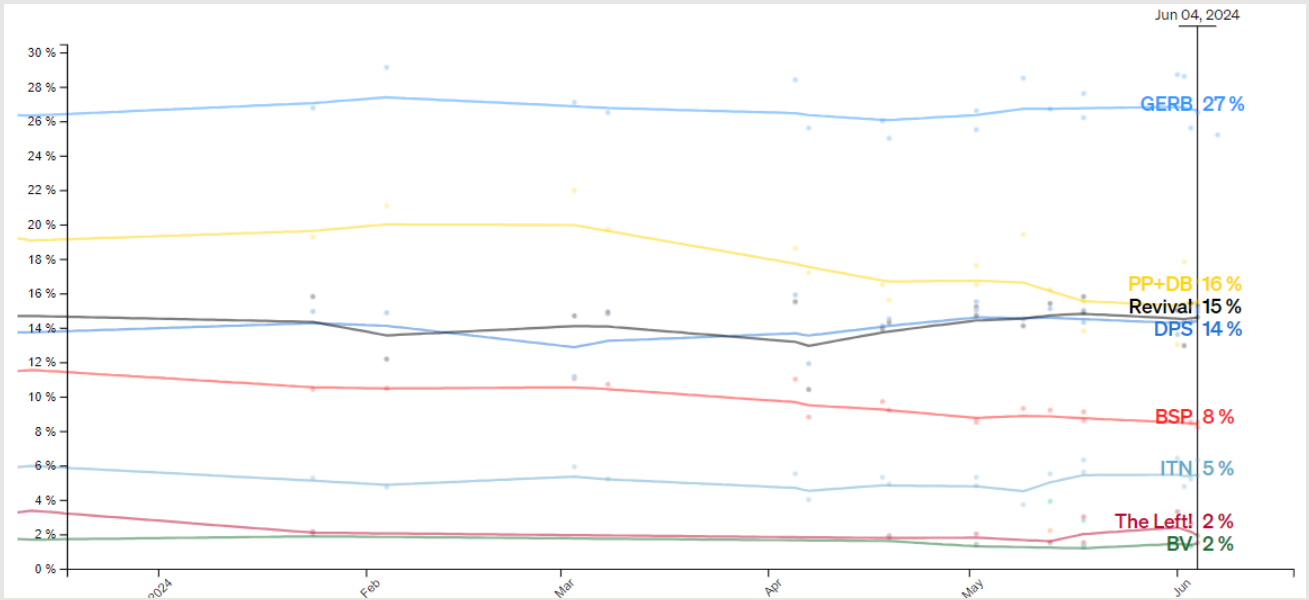
POLITICAL SITUATION

Bulgaria has faced an array of instability within the last three years due to the collapse of the government led by Kiril Petkov in June 2022. Corruption and a deteriorating state of the rule of law under the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's centre-right government and Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev¹ finally tipped over the jar in Bulgaria and led to mass protests in the country in 2020. What followed was a series of fragile government coalitions, each with very little success. A total of six national elections since 2022 failed to provide the formation of a reliable government. Until now, there is still no political stabilisation in sight.

The most recent rotation between GERB (acronym for Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) and the coalition of the liberal-conservative group – Democratic Bulgaria (DB) and the new centrists' group – We Continue the Change (PP) - which was elected in April 2023 failed to form a lasting bond.

In this year's premature sixth election for the Bulgarian National Assembly the centre-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party failed to get a significant majority of the voters and is now in search of yet another coalition partner. 27% of the voters decided to place their trust in the GERB party again. While the PP-DB coalition is receiving 16% of the votes and the ultranationalist and far-right revival party with 15%. The Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF/DPS), representing a significant ethnic Turkish minority, took 14% of the votes. Thus, proving the continuous political instability with no clear leader in the polls is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/why-thousands-are-fighting-the-bulgarian-government-they-have-no-vision-for-the-future/>



Polls showing the lead of the GERB party during the period January 2024 to June 2024 for the sixth election in Bulgaria

Corruption continues to have a negative impact on key sectors like healthcare, education, state of law as well as the economy. Concerning the influence on public health, it's causing the public to suffer from insufficient access to basic health care and having to endure long waiting times. Citizens often resort to fundraising money for basic hospital equipment².

² <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/why-thousands-are-fighting-the-bulgarian-government-they-have-no-vision-for-the-future/>

PUSHBACK PRACTICES



Statistics published by the Ministry of Interior of Bulgaria on how many attempts to cross the border to Bulgaria were made in each year 2022 - 2024.

There has been a significant rise of pushbacks from 2020 (15.000 people affected persons) to 2022 (87.650 affected persons)³. In 2023 the national monitoring mechanism of Bulgaria reported 9,897 alleged pushbacks affecting around 174,588 individuals⁴. Systematic practice of push backs seems to be strongly led by EU policy to curb irregular migration. Attempts to decrease irregular migration into the EU can be observed in the form of the “new” EU migration pact. Agreed on by the commission earlier this year the new practices are supposedly to secure external EU borders⁵. Effectivity remains to be seen. Concerns have risen about the pact especially about racial profiling methods that would intensify during the screening procedures.

Bulgarian authorities, influenced by EU policies and the desire to join the Schengen zone, frame these actions as "prevention of entry" rather than acknowledging the breach of international law⁶.

³ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/51197/bulgaria-migrant-pushbacks-whats-behind-the-rise-in-violence-at-the-bulgarianturkish-border-14>

⁴ https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AIDA-BG_2023-Update.pdf

⁵ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

⁶ <https://euobserver.com/migration/ar931239c9>

Pushbacks on the Bulgarian-Turkish border are documented to be violent involving physical mistreatment as well as use of firearms, forcing to undress, destruction of personal belongings, theft of personal belongings, and dogs used for intimidation⁷. The accession of Bulgaria into the Schengen area and EUs constant pressure to manage irregular migration have likely exacerbated these practices.

Pushback testimony collected for Border Violence Monitoring Network on the Turkish-Bulgarian border (April 2024):

“Coming from the south, the respondent states he and his transit group walked in the direction of the Hamzabeyli border crossing between Türkiye and Bulgaria. (...)

A few minutes after their border crossing they were seen and stopped by four men in dark-coloured outfits on which the respondent recognized the word ‘police’. The respondent remembers the men wearing belts with small guns attached, as well as a leashed dog they had with them.

At the place of apprehension, the transit group got beaten with batons by the policemen, while they threatened to release the dog on them.”⁸

The Kapitan Andreevo border crossing on the Turkish-Bulgarian border – not far away from the Greek border – was known in the past to be run by organised crime groups, who de facto controlled the crossing⁹. In 2022 the Bulgarian administration under Prime Minister Petkov tried to stop the illegal practices on the border and expelled Russian diplomats under the suspicion of espionage in an effort to manage the situation.

Still in 2023 the Bulgarian government was faced with accusations of letting people through the border in exchange for a bribe¹⁰. The corruption in Bulgaria is a long-lasting issue within all governmental areas. A parallel society led by oligarchs dating back to the communist era controls not only local society but also has strong influences on the judiciary system and with that compromise the rule of law.

During an EU council summit in February 2023 politicians lobbied to establish more border surveillance technology and additional resources to further strengthen the fence on the Turkish-Bulgarian border from the EU-commission. Later on in March 2023, resulting in a „Cooperation Framework”, where both Romania and Bulgaria received a total of 85 million Euros in funding to „enhance national capabilities

⁷ <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/january-3-2024-lesovo-bulgaria/>

⁸ <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/april-25-2024-hamzabeyli/>

⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-kiril-petkov-government-sounds-alarm-over-eus-mafia-run-border/>

¹⁰ <https://www.politico.eu/article/vengeance-migration-fight-europe-policy-eu-commission/>

at the EU's external borders“ and a deployment of additional 500 to 600 Frontex officers at the Turkish-Bulgarian border¹¹. In light of Bulgaria's recent partial accession into the Schengen zone the “Cooperation Framework” foresees a higher surveillance of the land crossings by increasing “border and migration management activities”¹².

Pushbacks deny individuals the basic right to apply for asylum and infringe international asylum laws. This results in many vulnerable individuals being returned to potentially treacherous situations without their claims being acknowledged. People on the move often avoid reporting abuses due to fear of deportation, leading to a lack of accountability for crimes committed against them. This perpetuates a cycle of abuse and neglect of vulnerable individuals.

Not rarely is this influenced by the enhanced border surveillance and violent enforcement of supposed “border security”. This pushes individuals to set off on increasingly fatal routes and methods, often facilitated by smugglers. Thus, risking fatalities due to suffocation, car accidents, and perilous journeys through hazardous terrain. Additionally, the continuous corruption at border checkpoints, including bribery and involvement of organised crime, undermines the rule of law and perpetuates illegal activities.

¹¹ <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-frontex-to-massively-increase-its-deployment-on-bulgaria-turkiye-border-despite-having-previously-ignored-evidence-of-pushbacks-%E2%80%95-european-commission-to-strengthen-co-operation-o/>

¹² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/07649e14-1d49-48f1-a08a-9f8d8b9d4e9e_en?filename=Cooperation%20framework%20between%20the%20European%20Commission%2C%20the%20EU%20agencies%20and%20the%20Republic%20of%20Bulgaria_en.pdf

THE ROUTE AND RISKS

The increase in border patrols and technologies as well as the violent treatment when caught by any of the authorities push people even more into the hands of human traffickers. The practices used by human traffickers are getting more extreme and dangerous trying to cross the border undetected.

As the starting point of the “Balkan Route” and one of the first EU countries people cross through while in transit, Bulgaria sees a lot of movement on their borders. Since 2015 the route has seen changes in the conditions people go through when making their way to western Europe, namely a significant increase in border patrols often with dogs and officers equipped with firearms.

A 234-kilometre metal fence along most of the border to Turkey was erected in 2017 by Bulgaria. Funded by the EU and equipped with barbed wire tops and thermal imaging cameras to try and pick out anyone attempting to cross¹³.

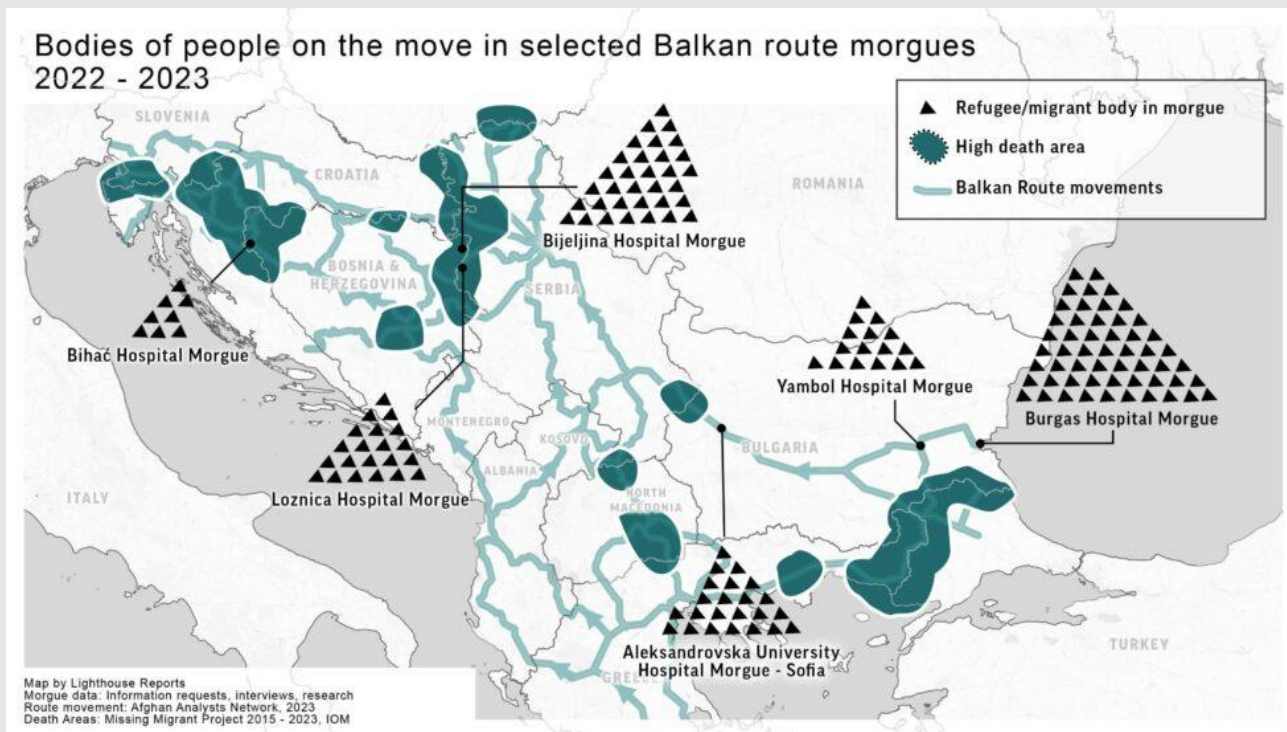


Screenshot from Euronews Witness report¹⁴ showing a secret compartment where individuals died due to suffocation.

¹³ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/55554/bulgaria-increases-frontex-officers-at-border>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXcoDDiiPPI>

Some methods include being caged in a secret compartment in a truck and having to stay there squeezed in with multiple people over hours or days. Reports describe how people die due to suffocation or get into car incidents due to the driver panicking and engaging in reckless manoeuvres to avoid a police check¹⁵. Others attempt to walk from Turkey to route 79 through a thick national park in Bulgaria's border region, which is treacherous territory and leaves people exhausted once they make it out.



Graph of bodies found in morgues along the “Balkan Route” provided by lighthouse report¹⁶

Individuals crossing the Turkish-Bulgarian border aim to transit through the country undetected. Consequently, many criminal acts against these individuals go unreported, as they fear being returned and deported by authorities if they attempt to report abuse. Consequently, it is challenging to monitor abuses along the route. One indicator of tragedies is the number of bodies being brought to morgues of undocumented individuals. A lighthouse investigation showed filled up local morgues along the Route 79 that people in transit are searching for on their journey.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXcoDDiiPPI>

¹⁶ <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/europes-nameless-dead/>

UNEQUAL TREATMENT OF ARRIVING PEOPLE

The EU's stance on decreasing irregular migration contrasts sharply with its response to the Ukraine crisis. Ukrainian refugees were granted the right to stay and work in the EU within ten days of the war's start, whereas Middle Eastern refugees face inhumane treatment and conditions in asylum centres. On June 11, the EU Commission submitted a proposal to extend the temporary protection for people fleeing Russia's aggression against Ukraine for another year, from 5 March 2025 to 4 March 2026.

Temporary Protection was introduced in 2001 to manage the mass influx of people in need of international protection. When the mechanism is triggered EU countries can grant immediate protection to people without the need for individual applications. As opposed to an asylum procedure, people who are granted temporary protection receive a residence permit for the duration of the protection (a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 3 years).

They are additionally granted access to employment, accommodation, social welfare, healthcare and education for children. Accommodations of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria are mostly on the coast of the Black Sea. They stay in old hotels and share rooms with their family members.

Asylum seekers are individuals who left their country and seek protection in another country. Seeking asylum is a human right protected by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 14), which states that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries and the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (and its 1967 Protocol), which protects refugees from being returned to countries where they risk being persecuted.

The UNHCR Regional Refugee Response Plan in Bulgaria was set up as an immediate response to the aggression of Russia in Ukraine and is still renewed and active as of 2024. It aims to support the uphold of rights associated with temporary protection or similar legal status in Bulgaria. It encourages national and local actors, including government ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs and community-based organisations¹⁷. Upon arrival, Middle Eastern individuals have no option but to apply for asylum to receive a legal status in Bulgaria; otherwise, they are placed in detention centres.

¹⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2023/02/Ukraine-Situation-2023-RRP-Bulgaria-Chapter-ENG.pdf>



Picture of the Pastrogor asylum camp (not a detention centre) 20 kilometres from the Turkish border

When searching for refuge at the border of a country, the country's authorities are legally obliged to examine your application according to Article 33 of the Geneva refugee convention (non-Refoulement). Bulgaria ratified the UDHR in 1998 so it is under obligation to adhere to international practices¹⁸. Once applications are processed, individuals may be declared refugees, granted subsidiary protection, permitted to remain for humanitarian reasons, or refused international protection. After the decision - no matter the outcome - they must leave government facilities and find their own accommodations. The right to appeal the decision is possible.

The legal situation in Bulgaria as an asylum seeker is difficult to navigate as a non-native speaker. Where there are translators present in the camps it still can be intimidating. The Helsinki Committee as well as Voice in Bulgaria are two legal aid organisations that provide legal representation for asylum holders and seekers that wish to apply to asylum in Bulgaria.

¹⁸ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/BULGARIA-English.pdf>

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES

In theory, asylum seekers receive basic health services covered by the Bulgarian government while their status is under review. However, NGOs working in Sofia frequently report that medical consultations and procedures are often limited to dispensing pain medication, with a generally dismissive attitude towards patients. Once the asylum process is completed, the government ceases to cover health insurance costs, requiring asylum holders to pay for it themselves. Without insurance one is obligated to only emergency care which is provided when an individual is finding themselves in an emergency condition.

LAW ON HEALTH

Chapter III

Medical assistance for emergency conditions

Art. 99.

- (1) The State shall organize and finance a system for the provision of medical assistance in emergency conditions.
- (2) An emergency condition is an acute or sudden change in a person's health that requires immediate medical attention.
- (3) Medical care for emergency conditions is aimed at preventing:
 1. death;
 2. severe or irreversible morphological and functional damage to vital organs and systems;
 3. complications in parturients endangering the health and life of the mother or the fetus.

During an ongoing asylum procedure, individuals are prohibited from working and thus face significant financial constraints. Only after a three-month period from the start of the asylum procedure are they able to search employment in Bulgaria¹⁹. Once granted asylum status, they become eligible to work. However, securing suitable employment can be challenging, not only due to language barriers but also because of exploitative practices of some Bulgarian employers. Labour being very physically taxing and the pay very low - even lower than the already low Bulgarian wages.

¹⁹ <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/>

Moreover, once asylum or temporary protection is granted, in order to apply for a residency card to further access healthcare and other social services and work an address other than the state camps have to be presented²⁰. The state does not provide assistance in finding accommodation in any way. People are left with little to no support other than what the network of NGOs in Sofia provide. Council of Refugee Women Bulgaria helps in finding accommodations and a free shop for various non-food items in the centre of Sofia. However, cannot be considered to provide holistic aid for all asylum seekers and holders residing in Sofia.

The basic health care package provided by the Bulgarian state does not cover prescribed medicines, lab tests or other medical interventions²¹. Purchases of baby formula, diapers and personal hygiene products are not covered by the government and leaves a big financial burden on asylum holders and seekers.

²⁰ https://www.asyl.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publikationen/Arbeitshilfen/BG_Rueckueberstellung_Dublin_EN_Information_Raphaelswerk_eV_19_-11.pdf

²¹ https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AIDA-BG_2023-Update.pdf

ASYLUM CAMPS

Upon arrival in Bulgaria, individuals who wish to claim asylum have the right to stay in government facilities located in Sofia, Stara Zagora, Harmanli, or Pastrogor, as stipulated by Article 29 (3) of the Law on Asylum and Refugees. These reception centres are managed by the State Agency for Refugees. Additionally, non-governmental organisations such as Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Helsinki Committee, and Médecins Sans Frontières (only in the Harmanli Camp) are present within these facilities to offer support and services to residents.

NGOs provide a range of assistance, including legal aid, medical care, psychological support, and integration programs to help asylum seekers adapt to their new environment and navigate the asylum process.



Map of Bulgaria with the government asylum seeker facilities Red numbers (open-type accommodations): 1: PASTROGOR CAMP 2: HARMANLI CAMP 3: BANYA CAMP 4: OVCHA KUPEL CAMP 5: VOENNA RAMPA CAMP 6: VRAJDEBNA CAMP // Black numbers (closed-type accommodations): 1: LYUBIMETS 2: BUSMANTSI

In contrast to the housing of Middle Eastern and African refugees, Ukrainian refugees are accommodated in old hotels at the coast to the black sea that are not operating during the off season. The conditions inside the hotels are hygienic and offer an apartment with sanitary facilities and sometimes a separate kitchen.



Pictures from one of the hotels at the Black Sea where Ukrainian refugees are accommodated taken from Google maps reviews

Common complaints from residents of the asylum centres include disrepair of rooms and sanitary facilities, beds infested with bed bugs, inadequate laundry service and showers. Respondents also said that hygiene products are only distributed once at arrival in the facilities. Since a lot of residents stay for about 3 months - awaiting the decision of their asylum procedure - the products do not last for a sufficient time.

The budget for maintaining government facilities has been severely cut in 2023. Thus, for example setting the budget for three meals per person per day at about 5.01 BGN (equivalent to about 3.08 Euros)²². Residents report inedible meals therefore buy their own food most of the time. Lastly, the facilities do not offer their own kitchen space for everyone making it harder to prepare nutritional and affordable food options by themselves.

²² https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AIDA-BG_2023-Update.pdf

The ministry of interior publishes data for each month on the number of residents in government facilities. During January 2024 over 2000 asylum seekers were accommodated between the six facilities in the country. Harmanli camp being the one with the biggest available capacity of over 1500 had over 1400 residents at the end of 2023²³.

MSF opened their clinic in July 2023 in Harmanli Reception Centre to address the medical situation of asylum seekers in and around the camp through provision of general healthcare consultations, sexual and reproductive health services and support for patients with non-communicable diseases²⁴.



Picture from inside the Harmanli camp taken by resident

²³ https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AIDA-BG_2023-Update.pdf

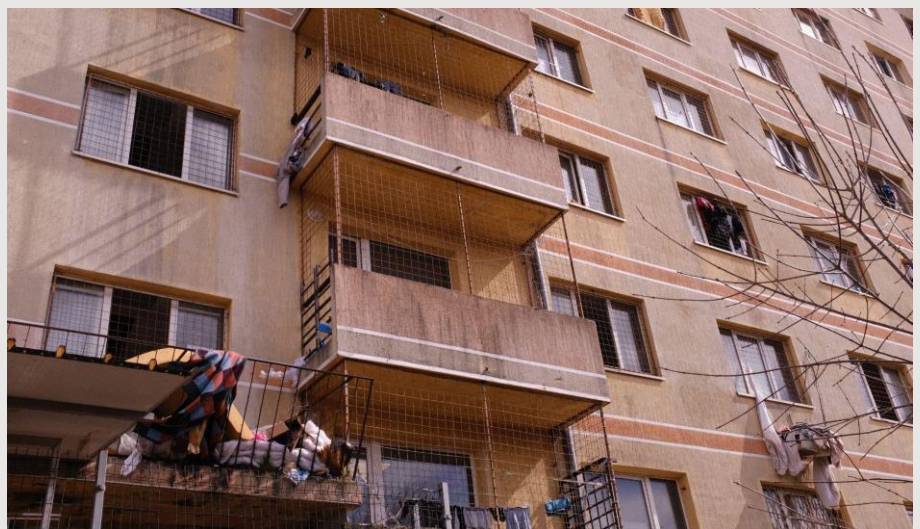
²⁴ <https://www.msf.org/bulgaria-msf-provides-medical-care-asylum-seekers-arriving-harmanli>



Pictures taken from the fence of Harmanli camp by Collective Aid team in March showing the facilities of the single men (photo 1) and the containers for families and unaccompanied minors (photo 2).



Pictures taken of the outside of the Ovcha Kupel camp in Sofia by Collective Aid team in March 2024

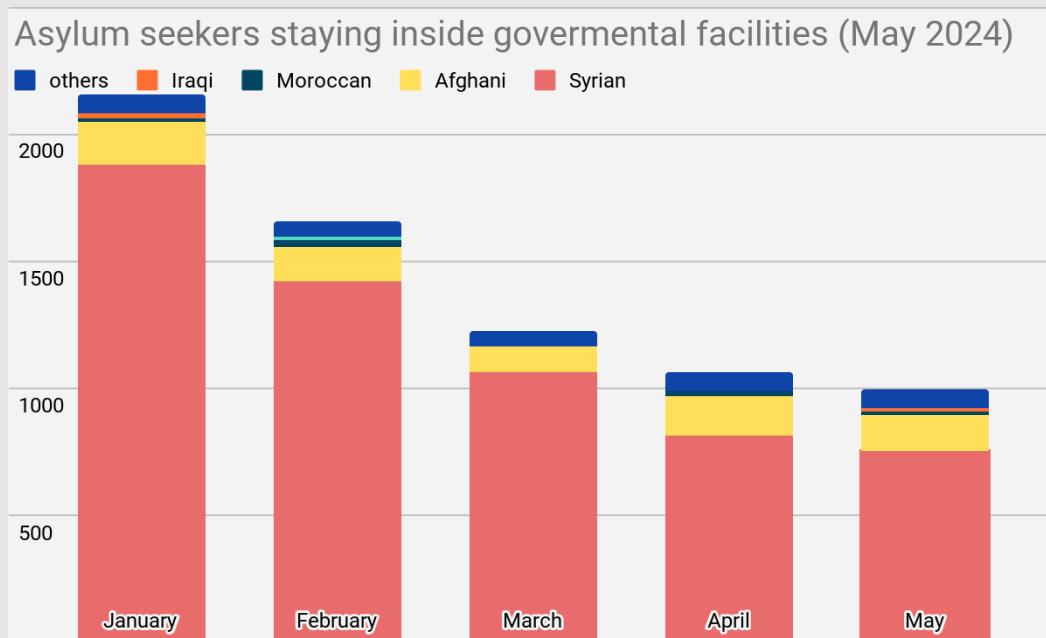


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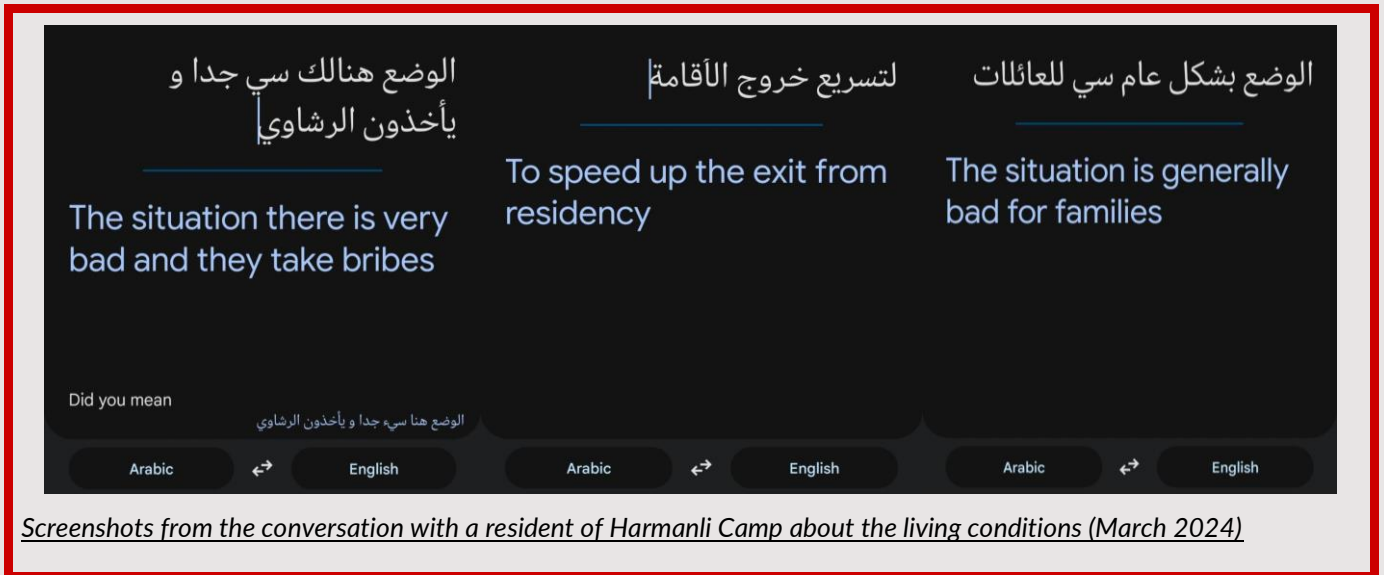
With the population inside state camps declining since the beginning of the year 2024 the management can still not provide adequate living conditions - leaving people to sleep in bed bugs and scabies infested environments. Due to the disastrous living conditions inside the Ovcha Kupel centre in the west of Sofia, some residents were transferred to the Harmanli camp in the south of Bulgaria near the Turkish border. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) is involved in transferring residents from one location to the other.



Stats from ministry of interior Bulgaria on Asylum seekers accommodated in six of their facilities²⁵

Influenced by the state of government the corruption is also felt by the residents of the camps. Talking to an individual from inside the Harmanli camp, near the Turkish-Bulgarian border, he shared through a translation application that the facilities inside are in bad conditions especially for families. This refers to the fact that while single men and families as well as minors are accommodated separately the families are in basic container accommodations outside of the buildings of the Harmanli camp. He also insisted that once you get a decision on your asylum application the families do not receive adequate support - material, financially or otherwise. He also shared that allegedly the staff examining the asylum claim can be bribed and thus quicken up the process.

²⁵ <https://www.mvr.bg/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE/programni-dokumenti-otcheti-analizi/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0>



FUTURE OUTLOOK

The prolonged political instability in Bulgaria has significant consequences, disrupting governance and deteriorating healthcare provision for both vulnerable communities and the local population. Instability hampers long-term planning and reform in economic development, healthcare, and education, deterring investments and impacting economic growth. Corruption erodes public trust, leading to protests and social unrest, further hindering healthcare improvements.

Uncertainty complicates migration and asylum policy development, leading to unequal treatment of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian arrivals. The UNHCR provides a somewhat holistic aid to Ukrainians, Middle Eastern and African asylum seekers and asylum holders are reliant on a network of NGOs present in the country, rather than an international action plan and programme.

As one of the first countries at the EU border Bulgaria plays a crucial role in the implementation of migration policies and is hugely affected by any decision made by international bodies in these regards. Consequently, interior fickleness can be detrimental to the country's ability to negotiate and collaborate on initiatives.

The violent nature of pushbacks, including physical mistreatment, use of firearms breaches international law and the denial of rights of individuals seeking asylum. Moreover, as the exposure to

violence and harsh treatment during pushbacks can exacerbate existing trauma from their countries of origin.

Bulgaria's push for Schengen accession is influenced by EU pressure to manage irregular migration. Due to efforts made in hindering people from crossing an increase of border patrols was initiated by Frontex and the Bulgarian gendarmerie. The EU's financial and logistical support for Bulgaria's border enforcement highlights the complex relationship between EU migration policies and national practices. While aiming to curb irregular migration, these policies can indirectly exacerbate human rights abuses and pushback practices. The focus on border surveillance diverts resources from potentially more humane migration and asylum policies at the expense of providing adequate support and protection for migrants and asylum seekers.

Conditions inside governmental facilities raise the concerns of public health risks. Poor hygiene in asylum centres increases the risk of disease outbreaks, which can affect both the asylum seekers and the broader community. While a limited access to medical care means that preventable and treatable conditions may worsen, leading to unnecessary suffering and higher healthcare costs in the long term. Additionally, to physical health deterioration the stress of living in poor conditions, coupled with uncertainty about the future, can lead to significant mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

With our operations we aim to deliver free basic health care services to any vulnerable group present around Sofia. Moreover, we plan to monitor the situation and well-being of camp residents and asylum holders accommodated outside the camps. Until the next report we aim to have a better understanding of the challenges asylum seekers and holders face daily and how we can adapt our services.