

Bulgaria

Advocacy Report

October - December 2024





Medical Solidarity
International



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INTRODUCTION

The increasingly right political landscape and ever-changing humanitarian context encompassing Bulgaria and the rest of Europe hold real-time consequences for those who are currently on the move, additionally for people who have been granted protection. Repeat elections in Bulgaria have resulted in a perpetual unstable government, at the same time falling concurrently with the countries' full entry into the Schengen after 13 years. Meanwhile, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime will mark a shift on how governments will recognise the asylum applications of Syrians, and has the probability to cause a ripple effect on the movement of people in the coming future.

In the interim, Bulgaria faces continued difficulty in providing adequate services for people staying in reception centres throughout the country, while also struggling with a healthcare system buckling under poor infrastructure and a shortage of doctors. Additionally, systemic overshadowing from governments and the European Union in addressing human rights violations at the border encourage continued violence against people on the move.

This report will examine how these circumstances merge to exploit people on the move, those with refugee/humanitarian status, and other vulnerable groups in Bulgaria and examine the role of humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of affected populations

POLITICAL UPDATES

Bulgarian Elections

(next page)

Bulgaria's failure to form a coalition after the June 2024 elections resulted in the country's seventh snap election in October 2024.¹ This election comes after four years of unstable and short-lived governments stemming from a series of anti-corruption protests that ended the Centre-Right GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) led coalition in 2020.² For many voters, it is now difficult to see a break in the deadlock that is besetting Bulgarian politics, a struggle underscored by low voter turnout and a deep distrust of the nation's government³. A 2023 survey by the Basel Institute on Governance, an independent non-profit organization focused on studying corruption showed 72% of respondents believed their high-ranking public officials to be corrupt.⁴ Bulgaria's struggle for a stable government continues, with the results of the most recent election resulting in a similar outcome from the last, with the GERB party at the lead with 26% of the votes and continued reluctance by other parties to form a coalition.

Entry into the Schengen

In March 2024, Bulgaria and Romania were granted partial acceptance into the Schengen with the removal of border checks from all forms of transportation aside from land travel. Subsequently, in January 2025 all border checks between the two countries were lifted as they became full members of the Schengen Area, encouraged by Austria's decision to lift their long-standing veto against the two countries.⁵

Austria's change of heart stems from a joint agreement made alongside Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary concerning a "border protection package", a scheme that seeks to send additional multi-national (Austria, Hungary, Romania) border guards to the Turkish/Bulgarian border. Additional promises have been made by Atanis Ilkov,

¹<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-holds-seventh-election-four-years-coalitions-fail-again-2024-10-24/> McAllister, Edward, "Bulgaria Holds Seventh Election in Four Years as Coalitions Fail Again", Reuters, October 24, 2024.

²<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/27/bulgarians-vote-in-another-election-but-end-to-political-deadlock-unlikely>. Al Jazeera, "Bulgarians Vote in Another Election, but End to Political Deadlock Unlikely", Al Jazeera, October 27, 2024

³<https://sofiaglobe.com/2024/10/28/pace-observers-well-organised-but-ineffective-elections-maintain-status-quo-in-bulgaria/>. The Sofia Globe, "PACE Observers: Well-Organised but Ineffective Elections Maintain Status Quo in Bulgaria", The Sofia Globe, October 28, 2024.

⁴<https://baselgovernance.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/230525%20Bulgaria%20corruption%20perceptions%20survey-FINAL.pdf> Thürk, Maria, and Stefanie Bailer, Working paper, Perceptions of Corruption and Anticorruption Efforts in Bulgaria: Results of a National Survey 2023, May 2023.

⁵<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/11/22/austria-signals-shift-in-veto-on-bulgaria-romania-joining-schengen/>. Inotai, Edit, "Austria Signals Shift in Veto on Bulgaria, Romania Joining Schengen", Balkan Insight, November 22, 2024.

Bulgaria's interior minister, to deploy an additional 1,246 border guards to the region alongside upgraded border technology. The use of border surveillance systems is not new to Bulgaria, with EU funding and helping maintain surveillance posts across the border between Turkey, the Black Sea, and more recently along the Serbian border in 2024.⁶

Syria

On December 8, 2024, opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and backed by the Syrian National Army (SNA) launched an offensive overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's government, ending a more than 60 year family rule over the country.⁷ This has come during a 13 year civil war which has killed around half a million people and displaced 12 million, 6.4 million of those who have been forced to leave Syria.⁸ Uncertainty still stands while the current leaders state their intentions to transfer power to a new, democratic government.⁹

Turkey, Israel and the U.S. continue to play a role within the country. Just days after the end of Assad's regime, Israel moved into the buffer zone separating Syria and Israeli occupied Golan Heights.¹⁰ Additionally, the country's use of airstrikes on military targets in Syria have led to warnings that Israel could exacerbate conflict and jeopardise peace in Syria.

Clashes between Turkish-backed SNF and the U.S. supported Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have only intensified in northern Syria since the end of Assad's regime. Turkey continues to view the SDF as a terrorist organisation linked to Kurdish insurgents in Turkey.¹¹ The U.S. on the other hand, views the SDF as their main ally in fighting against the last pockets of the Islamic State (IS). Fearing an attempt by

⁶ <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/BULGARIA-Surveillance-tech.pdf>. Barker, Hope, Lena Karamanidou, and Claire August (Research), Edited by Lena Karamanidou and Pauline F., Surveillance Technologies at European Borders, October 23, 2024.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c99x0l1d432o>. Gritten, David, "What Just Happened in Syria and Who's in Charge?", BBC News, BBC, December 9, 2024.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/08/syrians-celebrate-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-after-five-decades-of-dynastic-rule>. Christou, William, and Bethan McKernan, "Syrians Celebrate Fall of Bashar Al-Assad after Five Decades of Dynastic Rule", The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, December 8, 2024.

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¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/world/middleeast/syria-assad-israel-turkey.html>. The New York Times, "Syria after Al-Assad: How Will the Rebels Govern?", The New York Times, The New York Times, December 11, 2024.

¹¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2024/12/24/kurdish-forces-fight-back-against-turkish-backed-rebels-amid-clashes-in-northern-syria>. "Kurdish Forces Fight Turkish-Backed Rebels in Northern Syria", Euronews, December 24, 2024.

the IS to take back control in Syria due to the current political context, the U.S. continues to have an active presence in the country, and have recently conducted airstrikes against IS camps and operatives in the country.

UPDATES ON CONDITIONS IN CAMP

The State Agency for Refugees (SAR) is the main government actor responsible for receiving asylum seekers in Bulgaria, including operating Registration and Reception



Photo of MSI team setting up in front of Voenna Rampa RRC

Centres (RRC) throughout the country. This includes locations where Medical Solidarity International (MSI) (Medical Volunteers International's partner organisation in the country) have been present in providing first-aid support outside of these centres in Sofia (Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa), and in Harmanli. According to SAR, by the end of October 2024, there were 1,915 people staying in RRC's and Detention Centres throughout the country. Harmanli, the largest RRC in the country, reported 979 residents. Combined, Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa had 494 people.

SAR remains understaffed and underfunded, with 127 people on staff payroll across six RRC's, less than half than the total reported staff from January 2023.^{12, 13} Head of SAR,

Mariana Tosheva states in Parliament in March 2024, "According to the budget forecast

¹² <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/634395-state-agency-for-refugees-head-heard-in-parliament>. Vodenova, Yoanna, "State Agency for Refugees Head Heard in Parliament", BTA, BTA, March 13, 2024.

¹³ <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/53260/exclusive-syria-has-become-better-than-bulgaria--migrants-speak-out-about-conditions-in-eu-refugee-camp>. Brunnensum, Sou-Jie van, "Exclusive: 'Syria Has Become Better than Bulgaria' - Migrants Speak out about Conditions in EU Refugee Camp", InfoMigrants, Infomigrants, November 17, 2023.

for this year we had asked for BGN 22.5 million, the approved budget for the agency is BGN 11.700 million, of which a little over BGN 7 million are for staff salaries, i.e. the rest of the funds are used for running operations.”¹⁴ MSI, speaking to employees inside of Harmanli RRC in October observed the same frustrations, with difficulty in filling essential roles, including those for nurses and doctors due in part to low salaries and unappealing job prospects, with many of the camps being located in rural areas.

These budget limitations only exacerbate the conditions inside of these reception centres, resulting in limited sanitation and hygiene options, overcrowding and shortages to medical access inside of camp. Voenna Rampa RRC was left without medical staff from October until December 2024, resulting in heightened medical needs and a reliance on the services provided by MSI twice a week outside of the camp. Infected wounds, colds, and dermatological conditions such as scabies, fungal infections and rashes were frequent cases seen by people. MSI was unable for protection reasons to provide first-aid to minors, therefore relying on the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to ensure external medical access was given to unaccompanied minors staying inside the ‘Safe Zone’, a secure and protected space for children within some of the RRCs in Bulgaria.¹⁵ The Bulgarian Red Cross was, and still is



facilitating external appointments to general practitioners and specialists for people needing specialised medical support. These few examples show the reliance of SAR in receiving aid from other actors to cover much needed medical gaps, among other needs.

Photo of patient at MSI mobile clinic in Sofia

¹⁴ <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/634395-state-agency-for-refugees-head-heard-in-parliament>. Vodenova, Yoanna, “State Agency for Refugees Head Heard in Parliament”, BTA, BTA, March 13, 2024.

¹⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/press-releases/sar-unicef-iom-and-swiss-embassy-opened-safe-zone-unaccompanied-refugee-children#:~:text=The%20new%20%22Safe%20Zone%22%20in.the%20event%20of%20a%20crisis>. “SAR, UNICEF, IOM and the Swiss Embassy Opened a Safe Zone for Unaccompanied Refugee Children in the Registration and Reception Centre – Harmanli”, UNICEF, May 14, 2024.

An individual recounted having recently been pushed back from Serbia to Bulgaria while struggling with foot injuries due to his shoes falling apart after 22 days of his journey. While being held by Serbian police he was not provided medical care for an ingrown toenail which had formed, and once in Bulgaria was placed in a detention centre with minimal medical treatment. At his arrival to Voenna Rampa Camp, where there was no doctor, he came to seek support from MSI.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Health insurance is covered by SAR for asylum seekers awaiting their application status in Bulgaria, and are therefore entitled to the same health services as Bulgarian citizens.¹⁶ People who have been granted refugee or humanitarian status within Bulgaria, while entitled to the health insurance system, are required to personally cover the cost of their insurance (unless a child or in retirement age). If someone does not pay their health insurance for more than three months, that person is no longer able to re-enter the public health system until all previous debts are paid. This is the case for many people with refugee/humanitarian status, regardless of nationality.

Through this health insurance system, in order to receive medical treatment, someone first has to see a general practitioner (GP) who is responsible for filling prescriptions and providing referrals to specialists. In the case for people residing in camp, a GP is generally present to provide this service. Moreover, people who are awaiting their application, and those who have received refugee/humanitarian status can select their own GP. In practice, however, the act of someone seeing a GP, or of finding one is more difficult due to reasons ranging from faced discrimination and racism, a shortage of GPs

¹⁶<https://refugeelight.bg/en/articles/registraciya-pri-lichen-lekar>. "Registration at the Doctor/GP", Refugeelight.BG, n.d.

in the country, and general financial and material deficiencies in the healthcare system.¹⁷

Bulgaria is also seeing a shortage in the number of GPs present in the country, with only 3,320 GPs for 6.5 million people.¹⁸ This number is reducing every year as more GPs retire and fewer doctors take their place, either having left Bulgaria or choosing a different medical path. In rural communities such as in Harmanli, this gap is even more prevalent, with financial incentives to encourage doctors to work in these kinds of remote areas falling short of achievement.

Furthermore, GPs are often hesitant to receive new patients, often citing an already overwhelming patient list. While this is true in many cases considering the number of GPs available for patients, anecdotal evidence from organisations and people with refugee/humanitarian status note additional blocks such as a 'weariness' of GPs to receive patients they believe will shortly leave the country, as well as prejudice against those with protection status. On one occasion, it was communicated by a member of an NGO that a person had to pay a bribe to a GP in order to be seen after originally being refused service. Multiple published research highlights the extent of racism in healthcare throughout the European Union for marginalized communities including asylum seekers, which has been shown to actively harm the health of an individual and can even discourage that person to seek further medical support.¹⁹

It can be equally difficult for those residing inside of camp to receive the right medical care even with the presence of a GP. For one, doctors may operate on a limited schedule, working one or a few days of the week depending on their contractual obligations, which are sometimes independent of SAR. Distrust of government healthcare providers due to past experiences or fear of their health concerns remaining unaddressed can prevent people from seeking medical help. For those who do go see a doctor inside of camp, these concerns are magnified when they themselves do not

¹⁷ <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/reception-conditions/health-care/> Author Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Visit Website, and Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Visit Website, "Health Care - Asylum Information Database: European Council on Refugees and Exiles", Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, April 12, 2024.

¹⁸ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/health-consumers/news/bulgaria-facing-critical-shortage-of-general-practitioners/> Nikolov, Krassen, "Bulgaria Facing Critical Shortage of General Practitioners", Euractiv, October 1, 2024.

¹⁹ Pattillo, Mia, Sigsten Stieglitz, Konstantinos Angoumis, and Nora Gottlieb, "Racism against Racialized Migrants in Healthcare in Europe: A Scoping Review", International Journal for Equity in Health, Vol. 22, No. 1, September 29, 2023.

receive the correct treatment, either through a failure to address a larger problem, or in not receiving the referral they need to see a specialist. On several occasions in both Sofia and Harmanli, MSI had to find alternative routes for people residing in camp to receive appropriate care, either by taking someone to the emergency room, or by finding a specialist who was willing to examine a patient. This also forces people to pay out of pocket if able to afford to do so to see a private doctor or specialist.

Within detention centres, such as Busmantsi and Lyubimets, access to medical care is even more distressing. People can be brought to a detention centre for a myriad of reasons, including people on the move who have recently arrived in Bulgaria, someone having a rejected asylum claim, and other reasons which may not necessarily be explained.²⁰ While many people only stay within a detention centre for a couple of weeks before being brought to an RRC, others are left within the detention centre for longer periods of time. This can be life-threatening for people with more complex medical needs, as medical care within these centres are often poor, with minimal care and close to no flexibility in adapting living situations for those with more severe medical issues. Lack of proper medication and treatment, rejection of requests for dietary changes and reduced space for movement and exercise are just some of the concerns people have reported. Protests continue to take place by individuals and actors in Bulgaria in order to advocate for better conditions and human rights for people staying within these Detention Centres.²¹

Further limitations for medical treatment are placed financially on people using the national health insurance, including having to pay out-of-pocket expenses to conduct laboratory tests, or to fill a prescription at the pharmacy with exception to only a few medications such as for heart disease or high blood pressure. Hence, many people who do seek medical services are then prevented from accessing the necessary medication to treat their condition. This is especially prevalent for those needing long-term medications such as people with chronic conditions. Few organisations have the

²⁰ <https://refugeelight.bg/en/articles/zadrzhane-v-blgariya>. "Detention in Bulgaria", Refugeelight.BG, January 10, 2023.

²¹ <https://bnr.bg/en/post/102076209/human-rights-activists-are-calling-for-changes-to-the-conditions-at-the-detention-center-in-busmantsi>. "Human rights activists are calling for changes to the conditions at the detention center in Busmantsi". BRN November 17, 2024.

capacity to cover prescription costs for those who need financial support, and are themselves often limited in their capacity.

There can be additional hidden costs that come through when seeking medical treatment. On one occasion, MSI accompanied an individual to the hospital due to a talus fracture (breaking in one of the bones forming the ankle) he received three months prior. While most of the surgery would be covered through health insurance, some of the material needed for the procedure would have to be covered privately, a cost ranging close to one thousand euros.

DEPORTATIONS & PUSHBACKS

In the midst of praise given by the European Union concerning Romania and Bulgaria's accession as full members of the Schengen, the present de-facto policy of pushbacks continues along Bulgaria's external borders. Overlooked by the EU in favor of announcing the success of increased security and the reduction in the number of people crossing also overshadows and discredits the brutality enforced by Bulgarian authorities. This continues a year after the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) released a Security Incident Report (SIR)²² by a Frontex officer among other internal documents reporting on human rights violations committed against people on the move by Bulgarian authorities under their supervision. These reports are minimal compared to the number of observed yet unaddressed acts of violence committed against people at the border which Frontex and the rest of the EU are complicit, and only highlights actions which have been persistently condemned by NGOs.²³

²²<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24416803-sirs-2022/> Document Obtained by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) through Freedom of Information Requests reg. SIR FRONTEX complaints, 2022.

²³<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/06/eu-border-force-officers-intimidated-into-silence-on-migrant-abuse-in-bulgaria/>. Luděk Stavinoha, Maria Chereseva, "EU Border Force Officers Intimidated into Silence on Migrant Abuse in Bulgaria", Balkan Insight, September 8, 2024.

MSI has seen on several occasions instances of recent police violence occurring during pushbacks at the Serbian border that resulted in physical injuries to people who then were forced to seek first-aid support. Broken ribs, bruising throughout the body, and wounded legs, feet and ankles are some of the injuries observed.

Testimonies

1. An individual requested first-aid from MSI three days after a recent violent pushback by Serbian police which resulted in the person blacking out during the attack. He also suffered from fractured ribs and a hematoma as a result of the beating.
2. One person who came to seek first-aid support with MSI had a few days previously with a group of people in Serbia when they were seized by Serbian police close to the border with Bulgaria. The officers separated into groups and beat each person in targeted areas such as the groin and joints for the specific purpose of making it difficult to walk. Once they were brought back to Bulgaria, they were forced to seek help from Bulgarian police.
3. A minor had experienced three different pushbacks from Serbia. He recounted attempting to reach Serbia in the first instance with a broken leg. In a second time, police forces in Serbia used dogs to intimidate and attack the group, resulting in the minor being bit on the calf. On the most recent occasion, he was forced with his group to stand on the tips of their toes while the police beat them.

Germany's Repatriation Improvement Act (Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rückführung) came into effect in February 2023 with, among other controversial legislation, a goal on speeding up repatriations and deportations, without needing to provide notice to the person, (with exceptions for families with children under 12 years old).²⁴ Falling under the Dublin Regulations, this means individuals and families can be deported back to the first EU country where they applied for asylum, which includes those with a pending asylum application in Bulgaria, and people who have already refugee/humanitarian status in the country.

Among many consequences that have come from this Act, people have found themselves flown back to Bulgaria at odd hours with little to no warning. In many of

²⁴<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/55511/germanys-deportation-law--what-has-changed> Sanderson, Sertan, and Marion MacGregor, "Germany's Deportation Law - What Has Changed?", *InfoMigrants*, March 1, 2024.

these cases, people are left in front of any RRC in Bulgaria. For people whose application is still processing in the country, they are expected to return to the camp they previously stayed in before they left. This means, people who are brought to one RRC may not be given entry. MSI encountered one group of people who had been dropped off in front of Vrazhdebna camp in Sofia in the evening, and were not allowed to enter. What's more, they were made to find their way to their previous camp in Harmanli, located 250 km from where they were left. This example is one of many that occurs to people once they are deported back to Bulgaria, who are then forced to find any form of accommodation and transportation at the last minute.

Deportations occur throughout Europe, with people forcibly brought back to Bulgaria no matter the context, including those with medical issues. People coming back to Bulgaria due to the Dublin Regulations face additional challenges in accessing healthcare while they wait for health insurance to be reinstated, a timeline which can range from days to more than a month depending on the status of the person who left Bulgaria.²⁵

It is still too soon to tell what will happen for the future of Syria with the end of Assad's regime. Already several European countries have paused new asylum requests from Syrians just days after the events, while Austria is currently in discussions to deport Syrians from the country, where 10,000 people from Syria are currently living.²⁶ Syria is still facing challenges before the country can become safe for people returning, as high inflation, the destruction of public infrastructure and a crumbled economy come amidst continued fighting in certain areas of the country and no promise yet for political stability. Attempts at repatriation by governments also fail to acknowledge the millions of Syrians who have also restarted their lives outside of Syria.

Bulgaria officially has not ceased the processing of Syrian applications for asylum, with SAR stating it is still too early to make a decision on account of Syria's uncertain

²⁵ <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/reception-conditions/health-care/>.

"Health Care - Asylum Information Database: European Council on Refugees and Exiles", Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, April 12, 2024.

²⁶ <https://www.vox.com/today-explained-podcast/391179/syria-assad-civil-war-refugees>. Artsy, Avishay, and Noel King, "Assad Is Gone. Will Syrian Refugees Go Home?", Vox, December 14, 2024.

future.²⁷ Controversially, NGOs and journalists in Harmanli have collected testimonies of people residing inside of camp of Bulgaria's attempt at repatriating Syrians after interviewing 200 individuals about their views on the situation just days after the fall of Assad's regime, purportedly to use as a basis to reject asylum claims. Claims are also being made of Syrians being coerced to sign documents, including voluntary return papers for fear of violence. IOM and SAR, responding to the Guardian, both reject these claims.²⁸ SAR states that no-one within the camp has taken any action to force Syrians to return home. They have reported, however, that initiatives are being put in place to assess the intentions of current applicants after a number of people asked SAR staff about the possibility of returning to Syria.



Photo outside of Harmanli RRC

²⁷<https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/798221-bulgaria-has-not-decided-yet-whether-to-stop-asylum-process-for-migrants-from-sy#state%20agency%20for%20refugees>. Diana Dukovska, Ioana Dimitrova, "Bulgaria Has Not Decided yet Whether to Stop Asylum Process for Migrants from Syria", BTA, BTA, December 11, 2024.

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/18/bulgaria-syrian-asylum-seekers-return-fall-of-assad> Tondo, Lorenzo, and Ashifa Kassam, "Bulgaria Trying to Force out Syrian Asylum Seekers after Fall of Assad", The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, December 18, 2024.

CONCLUSION

Bulgaria faces significant challenges within their political, social and humanitarian surroundings. The country's repeat elections continue to result in failed coalitions, intensifying negative public perception. Furthermore, their entry into the Schengen, while marking a significant milestone for the country, is overshadowed by an increasingly militarised border and incessant human rights violations.

Syria's unexpected overthrow of Assad's regime has given people hope for positive change, yet it has also supplied fuel to the fire for right-wing politicians to use as a barrier against people's asylum applications and an excuse for forced repatriation.

Bulgaria's struggling healthcare system rife with discriminatory practices, as well as underfunded and understaffed reception centres only aggravate the obstacles people have to pass through in order to receive proper care. MSI, and other actors both international and local are essential in ensuring people have the resources they need in the region, and will continue to advocate for people amidst a time of change and uncertainty.