

Началник отделение:
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Пациент подпис:



ГРАНТОВО СПОРАЗУМЕНИЕ: НОМЕ/2016/АМІF/АG/EMAS/0044

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СЪВЪЕТСТВО НА ВЪТРЕШНИТЕ РАБОТИ – ДУССД
ДИНГ ПРОГРЕС"- град Етрополе
843,06 лева
финансовата подкрепа на ЕС по Механизма за специална финансова помощ в рамките на "Убежище, миграция и интеграция"



THE BULGARIAN TRAP:

МИНИСТЕРСТВО НА ВЪТРЕШНИТЕ РАБОТИ
ДИРЕКЦИЯ „МИГРАЦИЯ И ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ“

СЛУЖБЕНА БЕЛЕЖКА

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НАЧАЛНИК НА ОТДЕЛ „СДВНЧ – СОФИЯ“ ПРИ ДИРЕКЦИЯ „МИГРАЦИЯ И ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ“ КОМИСАР

параграф 4-6 от 5874/11.10.2023г.,

HOW EUROPEAN COUNTRIES FORCE ASYLUM SEEKERS INTO ABUSE

НАЧАЛНИК НА ОТДЕЛ „СДВНЧ – СОФИЯ“ ПРИ ДИРЕКЦИЯ „МИГРАЦИЯ И ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ“ КОМИСАР
Юри Николов



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Title: “The Bulgarian Trap: How European countries force asylum seekers into abuse.” ©

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ABOUT NO NAME KITCHEN

No Name Kitchen (NNK) is an independent civil movement **committed to defending the human rights of people on the move and asylum seekers, challenging systemic violence while providing essential support to individuals seeking safety and dignity.** Founded in 2017, NNK works closely with communities affected to identify, document, and report human rights violations, including pushbacks, collective expulsions, systemic neglect, and administrative and judicial misconduct, while offering legal counseling to individuals in distress. NNK's team has been present in Bulgaria since December 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ana Carolina Fisher da Cunha (LL.M., M.A.) is a lawyer specializing in international human rights, focusing on migration and border violence, particularly at Europe's external borders. She has participated in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean as a Human Rights Observer and recently contributed to a team working on strategic legal interventions before the ICC, seeking accountability for crimes against humanity committed against migrants in Libya and during pushbacks at sea. In 2024, Ana served as a Protection focal point in Harmanli, Bulgaria, where she documented testimonies of border violence and abuse against people on the move and monitored Dublin deportation cases to Bulgaria.

Esme Smithson Swain (M.A.) is a researcher specializing in European border violence. She is currently the border violence monitoring coordinator at No Name Kitchen, working to document the systemic injustices against people on the move in Europe. She has worked throughout Europe, including in France, Turkey, Italy, and various places along the Balkan and Southern Mediterranean routes. She also manages the Bloody Borders research project and has published research on border violence for various platforms, including Oxfam, the Guardian, and Al Jazeera.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Ric Fernandez, B.A. (Psychology and Social Economics), M.A. (Humanitarian Action), M.Sc. (WASH in Emergencies), is coordinator at No Name Kitchen, with over 15 years of experience in the humanitarian and migration-related sector. He has led research and advocacy initiatives in Vietnam, Nepal, Iraq, Palestine, and the Balkans, focusing on displacement, access to rights, and systemic violence, while participating in dozens of investigations into the use of violence as a tool of repression across the Balkan, Maghreb, and Mediterranean routes. His findings and analysis have been published in outlets such as El País, El Salto, and Al Jazeera.

This report stands as a direct result of the relentless work of NNK activists, past and present, whose investigation, evidence gathering, and daily support to those facing border violence are not just contributions, but the very foundation that makes documentation like this possible. Without collective commitment, none of this would exist.

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SUMMARY

As deportations to Bulgaria have risen exponentially in recent years, No Name Kitchen (NNK) has observed a troubling pattern of human rights violations. Drawing on testimonies from people deported to Bulgaria from other European countries, those at risk of deportation from Bulgaria to a third country, and people deported from Bulgaria to a third country, this report examines both the legal framework and the lived realities that people deported to Bulgaria face.

We address **destitution after deportation** and the evidence that those deported to Bulgaria with pending or accepted asylum requests are often denied access to reception centers, food, adequate healthcare, and financial support - an issue that the state itself acknowledges in some cases. Many are left homeless, forced to sleep on the streets, and struggle to access even basic material means for survival. Even those accommodated in reception centers endure extreme deprivation, including inadequate food, unsanitary conditions, and insufficient access to medical care. Meanwhile, many people deported to Bulgaria, particularly those with rejected asylum claims, face **detention in inhumane and degrading conditions**. Detention centers such as Busmantsi are overcrowded and unsanitary, and detainees report physical and psychological abuse. The report also sheds light on the **coercive practices used to pressure asylum seekers into signing "voluntary" return agreements**. Such practices include threats of prolonged detention, psychological abuse, deliberate misinformation about rights and procedures, and threats of physical violence.

The overwhelming majority of respondents reported experiencing human rights violations, including mistreatment that could amount to torture. **Every single respondent in this study experienced either destitution or coercion into signing 'voluntary' return documents.** These findings suggest that the fate of people deported to Bulgaria may be even grimmer than previously reported and that **the likelihood of experiencing human rights violations after deportation could be near certain**. Thus, this report not only exposes Bulgaria's role in perpetuating these abuses but also highlights the broader complicity of European states that continue to deport individuals to Bulgaria despite overwhelming evidence of systematic human rights violations. The European deportation regime prioritizes rhetoric of 'migration management' over human rights guarantees, forcing people from pillar to post, into a relentless cycle of displacement, detention, and expulsion.

INTRODUCTION

For years, NGOs have denounced Bulgaria's human rights violations - from pushbacks and detention to physical and psychological abuse. Yet, European states continue to deport people there under the false premise that it is a 'safe' country, ignoring overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Although largely overlooked by states issuing deportation orders, the fate of asylum seekers deported to Bulgaria may be grimmer than ever reported.

Bulgaria is a key entry point on the Balkan route. Seeking to curb irregular migration, the European Commission has funneled increasing funds and resources into Bulgaria's border regime,¹ as has the UK government, who pledged £1.2m of support in early 2024.² The intensified border control has led to significant and prolonged human rights abuses, such as pushbacks, where people on the move are forcibly returned to Turkey, denying them the right to apply for international protection. For those who manage to enter the Bulgarian asylum system, they are faced with inhuman and degrading treatment and unfair asylum procedures.

At the same time, Bulgaria faces **a large number of 'take-back' requests under the Dublin III Regulation**, which requires asylum seekers to have their claims processed in the first EU country they entered. In 2023, Bulgaria received 18,145 incoming requests - the second highest number among EU countries.³ This marked a staggering increase in enforced Dublin returns:⁴ from 78 returns in 2021 to 202 in 2022, 590 in 2023, and 589 in 2024.⁵ In addition to these, the UK carried out a further 202⁶ enforced returns to Bulgaria in 2024 under separate bilateral arrangements.⁷ The growing number of deportations only intensifies the challenges

¹ Source: <https://etias.com/articles/bulgaria-romania-border-support>

² Source: <https://www.declassifieduk.org/left-to-die-when-bulgarias-british-backed-border-guards-let-boys-freeze-to-death/>

³ Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=609592&title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_%28Dublin_Regulation%29&utm_source=chatgpt.com#Dublin_requests

⁴ While the Dublin III Regulation facilitates the transfer of asylum seekers between EU Member States, not all 'take back' requests result in actual deportations.

⁵ Source: Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_dubti/default/table?lang=en

⁶ UK Home Office, Immigration System Statistics, Year Ending December 2024. Returns - Detailed Datasets. Tab: Ret_D02. Source: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67bc86a9b3a80ad63e782cc8/returns-datasets-dec-2024.xlsx>

⁷ While the UK is no longer part of the Dublin system, returns still occur through bilateral agreements, the use of legacy Eurodac data, case-specific information sharing, and proceedings initiated under Dublin before December 2020.

faced by an already dysfunctional asylum system, which fails to meet both international and European human rights standards.

For these and many more reasons, Amnesty International has condemned **Bulgaria for doing the ‘dirty work’ of the European border regime**, discarding its international obligations under the guise of ‘defending’ its external borders.⁸ Whilst these rights violations take place, Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, has welcomed Bulgaria’s accession to the Schengen area (in January 2025) with open arms, describing Bulgaria as “fully committed to protecting EU external borders”,⁹ and promising even further funding for border control.

Part 1 of this report will provide background information, based on NNK’s ongoing and previous investigations, as to why people flee Bulgaria even after claiming asylum. We will explore four key human rights concerns faced by asylum seekers in Bulgaria: the use of detention and conditions in detention centers, physical and psychological violence, the lack of due process in asylum proceedings, and deaths and disappearances of asylum seekers. This section seeks to contextualize why beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria may still face threats to their rights and lives, leading some to flee.

Part 2 of this report will provide our observations on two main points of concern affecting people after deportation to Europe. We cluster the issues addressed in the testimonies according to two main themes: destitution after deportation and risk of onward refoulement through pressure into ‘voluntary’ returns. The first section examines testimonies of deported individuals plunged into destitution - systemically denied protection, welfare, or dignified treatment. The second section will address coercion that asylum seekers experience from the Bulgarian authorities to agree to a ‘voluntary return’ to a country of origin or a third country, as reported by 71% of respondents. We will unpack how this pressure manifests, including through threats of detention, physical violence, and prolonged psychological abuse. Based on the testimonies collected, we argue that people deported to Bulgaria face a grave risk of forced onward refoulement, disguised as ‘voluntary return’, in violation of Art. 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Art. 3 of the ECHR, among other legal provisions. We further argue that this practice of coercion may meet the severity and purposiveness criteria required to qualify as torture, as defined by the UNCAT.

This report does more than expose Bulgaria’s systemic abuse: it highlights European complicity. **European states, including the UK, continue to turn a blind eye to the grave**

⁸ Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2014/07/push-backs-across-the-border-the-dirty-work-of-keeping-refugees-out-of-bulgaria/>

⁹ Source: <https://x.com/vonderleyen/status/1764587430319890910>

and widespread human rights violations against people on the move and the blatant failure of the Bulgarian asylum system, choosing to carry out deportations to a country where asylum seekers are at serious risk of harm. Deporting states enable a system that punishes, rather than protects, asylum seekers. As argued by the Refugee Solidarity Network, this system “entrenches a containment paradigm”, and vast numbers of people in need of international protection are pushed into regions without resilient institutions or structures for protection.¹⁰ From pushbacks to detention, refoulement, and destitution, we seek to shed some light on the harsh realities faced by those deported to Bulgaria.

¹⁰ Source: <https://refugeesolidaritynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/BU-RSN-Bulgaria-Report-final-final-2018.pdf>

Photo outside
Lyubimets Detention
Center, Bulgaria,
stating the facility is
funded under the EU
Migration and Asylum
Fund



ФОНД: "УБЕЖИЩЕ, МИГРАЦИЯ И ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ"



ГРАНТОВО СПОРАЗУМЕНИЕ: НОМЕ/2016/AMIF/AG/EMAS/0044

ДОГОВОР № 5785млд-22/17.06.2020г. с предмет: "Изготвяне на инвестиционен проект, упражняване на авторски надзор и изпълнение на строително-монтажните работи /инженеринг/ за изграждане на инфраструктурен район с мултифункционално предназначение за нуждите на Министерство на вътрешните работи с адрес: гр. Любимец, бул. „Оарин“ № 73

ВЪЗЛОЖИТЕЛ: Министерство на вътрешните работи – ДУССД

ИЗПЪЛНИТЕЛ: ДЗЗД "БИЛДИНГ ПРОГРЕС"- град Етрополе

Стойност на договора: 3 033 843,06 лева

Проектът е осъществен с финансовата подкрепа на ЕС по Механизма за спешна финансова помощ в рамките на фонд: "Убежище, миграция и интеграция"

METHODOLOGY

As with all NNK's investigations, the testimonies collected by NNK field reporters form the basis of this report. NNK's process of testimony collection aims to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatization, avoid narratives of victimization, and provide a safe and empowering space for respondents to talk about the violence they have suffered. NNK conducts semi-structured interviews without rigid question sets, allowing respondents to speak freely at their own pace and focus on the issues most important to them. This means that the testimonies collected address a wide range of themes, such as conditions in camps, detention, access to asylum procedures, physical and psychological abuse, and the respondent's feelings about their experiences.

Through years of continuous fieldwork along the Balkan route, NNK has documented troubling patterns in the treatment of asylum seekers in Bulgaria. To better understand and report such patterns, NNK **collected new testimonies from respondents who have (a.) been deported to Bulgaria from another European country, and/or (b.) are at risk of deportation from Bulgaria to a third country, and/or (c.) have been deported from Bulgaria to a third country.**

To analyze these patterns, NNK collected testimonies from 21 individuals, including:

- 12 respondents who were previously deported to Bulgaria from an European country,
- 8 respondents at risk of deportation from Bulgaria to a third country,
- 4 respondents who have already been deported from Bulgaria to a third country.

The two main themes addressed in this report - destitution after deportation and coercion into 'voluntary' returns - emerged from the inductive coding of the testimonies collected. Although the process of collecting testimonies is ongoing within NNK, when producing reports the aim is to reach saturation, meaning that further reports only confirm what has already been shown and no new information is provided.



80% of the respondents have been detained or are currently detained.



75% of respondents who were previously deported to Bulgaria from another European country mentioned experiences of destitution.



71% of respondents described experiencing pressure to sign a 'voluntary' return document to be taken to a 'third country'.

Every single respondent who had previously been deported to Bulgaria from another European country reported either evidence of destitution or coercion to sign a ‘voluntary’ return agreement, or both.

While our sample size is limited, this must be understood within the context of extreme access restrictions and systemic detention practices that obstruct independent investigations. The process of evidence collection is also severely limited by the repression faced by NNK in Bulgaria, as well as the Bulgarian authorities’ practice of isolating individuals in centers such as Busmantsi where their ability to speak freely or safely with independent investigators is severely constrained.

Despite these challenges, the testimonies gathered reflect a diverse range of respondents - varying in immigration status, nationality, and age - yet they reveal strikingly consistent patterns of behavior by Bulgarian authorities. These findings align with previous investigations by independent organizations, which will be referenced throughout this report.

Whenever possible, NNK has published the original testimonies on the [Bloody Borders](#) website. However, given the delicate nature of this investigation and the fact that many respondents are still detained at the moment of writing, some testimonies could not be made public without risking further harm to the respondents. Some of these testimonies will be published at a later point.

*Lyubimets Detention Center,
Bulgaria*



BACKGROUND: FLEEING BULGARIA

During our investigation for this report, many people shared their stories as asylum seekers and explained why they felt compelled to flee Bulgaria, even after claiming asylum there. In fact, almost half of the asylum seekers abandoned their pending asylum procedure in Bulgaria in 2023.¹¹ The testimonies summarized here represent just a fraction of the tens of thousands of similar stories, illustrating the widespread and systemic issues that permeate the Bulgarian border regime and asylum system which render them both abusive and ineffective.

In this report, NNK highlights four key human rights concerns in Bulgaria that repeatedly emerged in interviews as reasons for people to flee the country: the dire conditions in detention centers, the widespread use of violence and mistreatment against asylum seekers (including arbitrary detention, physical and psychological abuse), the lack of due process in asylum proceedings, and deaths and disappearances of asylum seekers, for which accountability never manifests. While each of these topics could give rise to an in-depth report of its own, the following sections seek to summarize key elements within separate categories and highlight relevant pieces of individual testimonies that better illustrate such practices.

Our findings reveal a concerning pattern of abuse and neglect and expose Bulgaria's failure to uphold its obligations under international and European law, which will be analyzed in detail in the following sections.

A. DETENTION CONDITIONS IN BULGARIA

The widespread use of detention in the reception system in Bulgaria is alarming: asylum seekers who have entered the country by irregular means¹² will typically be issued a removal order and detained for the purpose of executing that order.¹³ Thus, many individuals file their asylum claims from detention. Their asylum application is then forwarded to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), which will register and accommodate asylum seekers in reception centers.¹⁴ Once registered as an asylum seeker, the execution of a removal order

¹¹ Source: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/>.

¹² Note that regular means to claim asylum in Europe are almost non-existent for most nationalities.

¹³ Source: <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/detention-of-asylum-seekers-interaction-between-the-return-and-reception-conditions-directives-in-bulgaria/>

¹⁴ *Id.*

is suspended until a final negative decision on the asylum application is issued.¹⁵ Similarly, when a person is deported to Bulgaria, authorities may issue an administrative removal order and a detention order. In practice, asylum seekers in Bulgaria may be detained until they are formally admitted into the regular asylum procedure.¹⁶

The Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees (SAR) states that detention may be used against applicants for international protection for a period as short as possible:¹⁷

1. for establishing or verification of his/her identity or nationality;
2. for establishing of facts and circumstances based on which the application for international protection is filed, where this cannot be done in a different way and there is a risk that the applicant can abscond;
3. where this is required for the protection of national security or public order;
4. for establishing the state competent to consider the application for international protection and transferring of a foreigner to the competent state, and where there is a serious risk that the foreigner can abscond.

However, a 2024 UNHCR report observes that, in some cases, “detention orders are issued for the entire duration of the procedure for international protection, rather than for the shortest possible period as required under the LAR”.¹⁸ The report adds that “the detention decisions for asylum seekers are not individually assessed considering reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality, and that there is no consideration of alternatives to detention”.¹⁹

The resulting situation is that **detention - in facilities such as Busmantsi and Lyubimets - is the cornerstone of the Bulgarian reception system**. Although the SAR describes these facilities as ‘closed accommodation centers’, a respondent described to NNK that it “meets all the criteria of a prison: iron doors, the permanent presence of security guards in official uniforms, lack of freedom of movement inside the center, adding to that 24/7 surveillance cameras and eavesdropping devices inside the rooms, the lack of possibility to leave it to go to the court or to a hospital except in handcuffs and highly guarded prisoner transfer vehicles”. In a letter from Busmantsi, Abdulrahman Al-Khalidi, a Saudi political prisoner detained in Busmantsi for over 3 years, wrote:²⁰

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Source: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/factsheet_dublin_transfers_bg.pdf; See Art. 45b (1), Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR)

¹⁸ Source <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111495>

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/12/bulgarias-immigration-prisons-are-systematically-violating-human-rights/>

“ This place is not an official prison, but we are prisoners. ”

- Abdulrahman Al-Khalidi, in his Letter from Busmantsi

In addition to being widespread, detention in Bulgaria is also often arbitrary: speaking to InfoMigrants, Victor Lilov from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee points out that many people whose asylum applications are rejected cannot be deported because of the lack of diplomatic channels to get consular passes.²¹ However, this does not justify the prolonged detention - Bulgarian law states that detention can last for six months, with a possible extension of up to 18 months.²² Lilov states that, in order to justify extended detention, the State Agency for National Security "produces blank notes [secret information reports filled out by the police or intelligence services - editor's note], without us being able to know the argument".²³



Infected wounds and ulcers caused by insects (NNK)

NNK has received numerous reports of inhumane detention conditions through its field presence and the testimony collection process for this report. One respondent informed NNK that the rooms of Busmantsi are full of bed bugs, “to such a point that detainees move spiders to their beds because it's the only way they can fight the other bugs and reduce their amount”. The respondent reported that people detained in Busmantsi regularly experience severe infections and wounds as a result

²¹ Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58185/migrants-deprived-of-their-fundamental-human-rights-in-bulgarian-detention-centers>

²² Source: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/detention-asylum-seekers/legal-framework-detention/duration-detention/>

²³ Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58185/migrants-deprived-of-their-fundamental-human-rights-in-bulgarian-detention-centers>

of this. He also states that SAR continuously decreases the meal quantities, and that dinner is often cancelled to 'reduce costs', leaving detainees with just lunch. He criticizes the extremely poor healthcare and explains that there is no psychological support available in Busmantsi. Reportedly, only one doctor is available, and when absent, no healthcare services are provided. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee has found similar conditions during their investigations, arguing that nutrition is poor in Bulgarian detention centers, healthcare is a major issue, as well as the lack of proper medication.²⁴ The Committee for the Prevention of Torture has also expressed concern over the lack of access to psychiatric care (which is limited to emergencies) during their 2019 investigation.²⁵

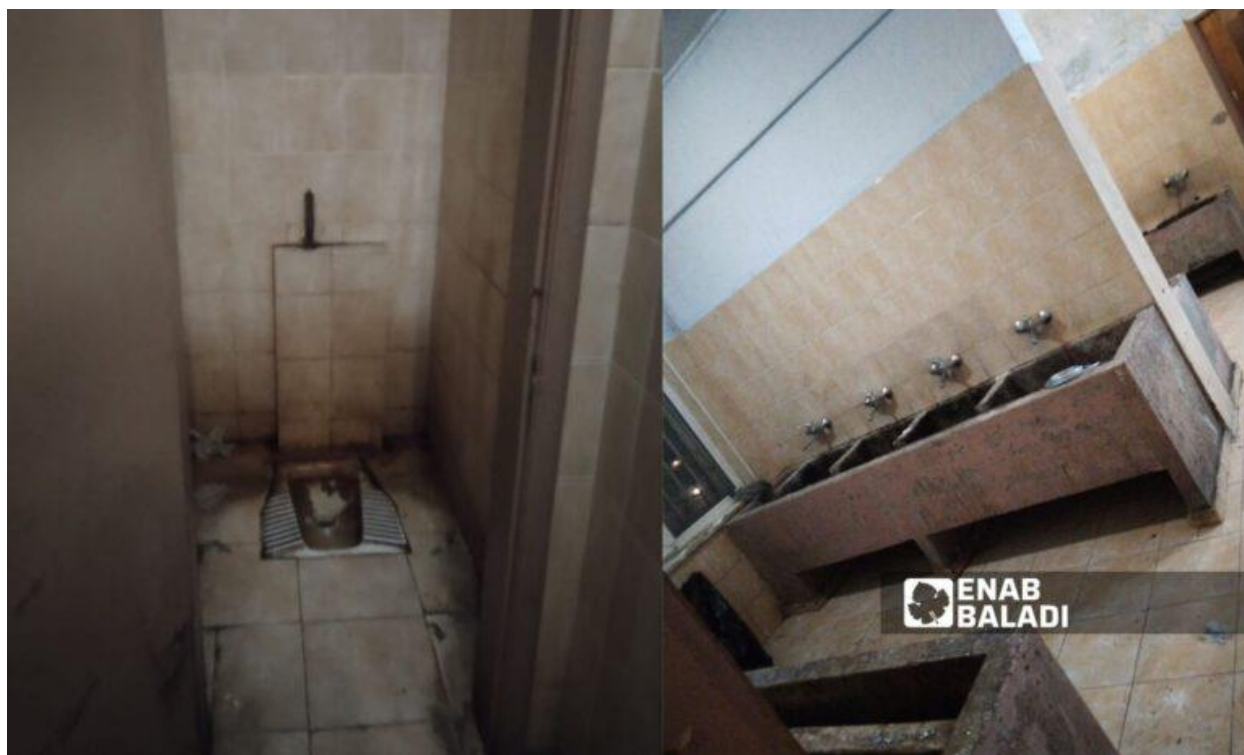


²⁴ Source: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/detention-asylum-seekers/detention-conditions/conditions-detention-facilities/>

²⁵ Source: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/the-cpt-publishes-report-on-bulgar-1>

Mould and damp inside Busmantsi (NNK)

Another respondent detained in Busmantsi reported that the rooms were crowded, with up to 35 individuals crammed inside, dirty, and infested with insects, which often resulted in skin eruptions in detainees. He said that they were treated like prisoners and only allowed 30 minutes at the camp's yard each day. After 10 pm, no one was allowed to leave their room to go to the bathroom and people had to urinate in empty bottles in the rooms. He confirms how access to food was restricted and insufficient and said that hunger was constantly present among detainees. Keeping food inside the room was strictly forbidden and detainees would be kicked and beaten up with hands or clubs if the guards discovered any hidden food.



Dirty toilets and bathing spaces at the Busmantsi detention center in Bulgaria (Enab Baladi)²⁶

²⁶ Source: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/11/syrians-in-bulgaria-face-deportation-or-imprisonment/>

Another respondent who has a chronic illness had his time in Busmantsi marked by systematic neglect and abuse and told NNK reporters how social workers refused to assist with his medical needs. Despite his urgent need for treatment and additional complications of influenza, the medical file officer at the detention center showed complete indifference to his requests, and the necessary medication doses were not administered. He reported to NNK that the social affairs officer refused any communication with specialist doctors and warned that any attempt by him or his friends to reach a doctor would result in the doctor's contact being blocked.

This respondent's health had already deteriorated after years of detention in a Syrian prison. Despite his worsening condition in Bulgaria, with the progression of his disease, authorities accused him of faking illness to escape detention and pressured him to return to Turkey, where treatment costs are prohibitively expensive. His suffering was worsened by the inhumane conditions faced in the dirty and abusive environment of Busmantsi:

“ The situation is very bad, it's like Saydnaya prison in Syria! We suffer from hunger, filth, scabies, and a lot of insects and mites. Detainees are sometimes beaten with batons or by hand. ”

- Respondent in Busmantsi

His fragile health condition made him less likely to be targeted for physical abuse, but his cries for help were constantly ignored:

“ When I was in pain, I would scream and no one would hear me; and when the administration was disgusted by my screams, they would call an ambulance to inject me with [sedatives] to relieve the pain - and that would be the end of it. ”

- Respondent in Busmantsi

After his release from Busmantsi, his health deteriorated due to the mistreatment he endured.

B. PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Conditions in detention seem to be not only unhygienic, but also extremely violent. Testimonies shared with NNK are supported by extensive criticism of Bulgarian detention centers from newspapers, journalists, and NGOs. In March 2024, InfoMigrants published an article in which residents described the awful conditions inside, including regular police beating in both Busmantsi and Lyubimets.²⁷ One resident reported to InfoMigrants:

“ Those 13 days seemed like 30 years. ”

- Respondent in Busmantsi, speaking to InfoMigrants

Similarly, a respondent interviewed in January 2025, recently deported from the UK to Bulgaria, informed NNK reporters that he decided to leave Bulgaria after being beaten up by police multiple times, which resulted in a broken nose. He reported being taken to Busmantsi detention center near Sofia, which he described as disgusting and cold.

Another respondent, who provided his testimony to a partner organization, stated that, during his two years of detention in Busmantsi, he was subjected to continuous psychological and physical abuse. He reports that, during the first three months of his detention, he was held in solitary confinement without ever being informed of his charges or the reason for detention. He reports that the Bulgarian SANS (State Agency for National Security) told him that he would never see his family or children again and threatened to hand him over to the Assad regime. He recalls being mocked and told that there was no point in involving courts or lawyers since he would not be released anyway. He states:

“ I tearfully begged them to release me, telling them that I had to leave my pregnant wife behind, but they just laughed at me. They coldly told me that I would ”

²⁷ Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58185/migrants-deprived-of-their-fundamental-human-rights-in-bulgarian-detention-centers>

never see my child again.

- Respondent in Busmantsi

He reports that he was also subjected to physical violence, stating that an officer hit him in the face until blood poured from his mouth - all because he did not close a door when instructed in Bulgarian, a language he does not speak. He told NNK reporters:

“ The injustice I have experienced is immeasurable. If I were to tell everything in detail, not even a whole newspaper would be enough to describe my suffering. ”

- Respondent in Busmantsi

In October 2024, NNK reporters in Serbia collected the testimony of a young Moroccan man who had fled Bulgaria after being detained there along with three of his friends. He described the facility as: “a prison with criminals and they put us with them”. The respondent was unable to answer why he had been detained. He informed NNK reporters that he and his friends were treated badly and were denied the right to contact their families. Despite repeated requests, they were mocked and beaten by prison guards each time they asked to make a call. Additionally, they were denied access to the toilet when needed. Once released, the respondents fled Bulgaria and gave their testimonies to NNK field reporters in Belgrade.

In July 2024, NNK met a young Moroccan man who had been detained in Sofia and taken to what he described as a ‘camp’. From his description, this may have been either a reception center or the Busmantsi detention center. He told NNK reporters that while in the ‘camp’, he was beaten by the police and felt ‘dehumanized’. The beatings occurred frequently and without apparent reason. After 14 days, he was released and fled Bulgaria. He stated:

“ They looked at us like we were insects, not like human beings with dignity and rights... I couldn't believe the brutality of the treatment. ”

- Respondent in Sofia

One of the respondents also stated that he fled Bulgaria due to prolonged violence. Describing his treatment by the Bulgarian police, he said: “They deal with us as if we were not refugees, but criminals. They don’t respect the law”. He further stated that “the dogs’ life and food was better than the food for the refugees at the camp”. Regarding his time in Busmantsi, where he was detained without knowing the reason, he shared:

“ One day I was punished for having cookies in my room. They beat me up and afterwards didn’t allow my lawyer to visit, so that he wouldn’t see my injured body. ”

- Respondent in detention in Busmantsi

The testimonies collected revealed that cases of physical violence and abuse not only take place in detention, but also at the Registration and Reception Center (RRC) Harmanli - the largest one in Bulgaria. In November 2024, NNK reporters on the field were informed that two men in the Harmanli Reception Center were severely beaten by the police with no justification. The officers had been called to break up a fight between two different people, who fled by the time the police arrived - in response, the police reportedly assaulted two different men, one of which ended up with a serious eye injury. Multiple eyewitnesses confirmed the story and reported that the victims were randomly selected by the officers. One respondent affirmed that the guards kept beating the two men up even after they realized that one of them had a severely damaged eye. Videos shared with NNK show the police leaving the room after the incident and the two injured men but cannot be published until the affected persons have left Bulgaria or are in a secure environment.

One respondent described experiencing and witnessing repeated violence in Bulgarian camps. As soon as he arrived in Busmantsi, he was beaten, strip searched and had his belongings confiscated. On the day of his release, he was dragged into a different room and beaten for not responding to the guard’s call fast enough. He also reported several incidents of physical violence in the Harmanli camp and recalled one night when masked police stormed one of the rooms during the night and beat everyone inside. He explained that the violence in the camp is frequent and arbitrary and often takes place in areas without cameras, such as bathrooms. He said that guards would beat people violently:

“ You can’t help anyone. You can just stay there, listen, and wait. They usually break into the rooms as groups of policemen or guards, and you can’t defend yourself against them. ”

- Respondent who experienced repeated violence in Bulgarian camps

Another respondent told NNK that he and his friends lived in constant fear of the police and tried to avoid them as much as possible, but the violence, humiliation, and lack of support have left him feeling completely helpless. He explained that any inconvenience, no matter how minor, can result in beatings. The guards and police routinely subject asylum seekers to physical abuse, threats, and insults, sending a clear message: *“Leave. We don’t want you here”*.

A respondent reports being taken to Harmanli camp after being deported from Germany. He was confined in a room with one other person for 15 days, without furniture or food - he believes this was because his camp ID had not been issued yet. The only food he had access to came from another camp resident who brought him provisions during their visit. When he eventually received food from the camp, the portions were so small that they were, in his words, "not even enough for children". He described the room as filthy and infested with bugs, which caused severe itching and bleeding. Without bedding, he suffered in the cold and became seriously ill. He also stated that the camp management regularly screamed at them and threatened to call the police.

Another respondent also reported being kept in an unfurnished room at Harmanli camp for around 15 days after his deportation from Germany, with no access to food, until he received his camp ID. He told NNK:

“ They took our life away from us and didn’t tell us when we would have it back. ”

- Respondent in Harmanli Camp

Medical neglect was reported by multiple respondents, not only in detention centers, as explored above, but also in Reception Centers. For example, one respondent reported being denied medical care and ignored by the camp staff when experiencing severe pain and vomiting. When he sought help at the camp clinic, the doctor dismissed his condition and

gave him a prescription that the pharmacy couldn't read, making it impossible for him to access the necessary medication.

Cases of violence against people on the move in the moment of interception by the Bulgarian Border Police, or immediately after, are also commonly reported. For example, in September 2024, NNK reporters collected the testimony of a man who experienced extensive violence after crossing to Bulgaria. He informed that, while walking in the forest, his group was stopped by what he identified as the Bulgarian gendarmerie, who fired their guns in the air. The group squatted to protect themselves from gunshots and were kicked by the officers. Their personal belongings were stolen, and the respondent was taken to the Busmantsi detention center in Sofia, where he was held for 29 days. Once released, he fled Bulgaria.²⁸

Another respondent reported being severely beaten up and screamed at as soon as he was caught close to the border in Bulgaria. He was taken to detention and recalls being starved and dehydrated, with no access to water for three days during his journey to Bulgaria. Despite asking the policemen for water and food in different languages, they denied it and made fun of him. When the station's superior officer arrived, they were finally given water, but only offered canned pork, which they could not eat due to their religious beliefs. Refusing the food led to further beatings and insults related to their religion. The police then took them to translators, searched them, and confiscated all their belongings, which were never returned. They were given minimal food - one packet of biscuits for every three to four people - and were transferred to a closed camp, where they stayed for 15 days. At the closed camp, he was beaten and slapped while being interrogated and stripped down to his underwear with nothing to cover himself. On the day of his release, the respondent was beaten again for answering the guards too slowly.

NNK records countless more stories of police brutality against people on the move, which can be found on the Bloody Borders website.²⁹ The treatment of detained asylum seekers described in this report constitutes a clear violation of the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment - enshrined in the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) and many other international instruments, such as Art. 3 of the ECHR, Art. 5 of the UDHR, and Art. 7 of the ICCPR. The abhorrent conditions within Bulgaria's asylum system have also been the subject of a ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee in February 2017. The Committee determined that the removal of the claimants to Bulgaria would violate their rights under Article 7 of the ICCPR,

²⁸ In many similar cases, these acts of violence are followed by pushbacks. While this report does not focus on the illegal practice of pushbacks at Bulgaria's borders, further information on this topic can be found on the Bloody Borders website: <https://bloodyborders.org/>

²⁹ Check full report at: <https://bloodyborders.org/>

considering the mistreatment they endured at the hands of Bulgarian officers upon arrival, the denial of medical care, the lack of assistance from Bulgarian authorities, and their inability to provide for themselves - all issues that have been extensively reported to NNK and outlined in this report - among other reasons.³⁰

Some of the reported cases may even reach the threshold for torture, a prohibited practice recognized as a *jus cogens norm* - a peremptory norm of international law. Art. 1 of the UNCAT defines torture as an act carried out by, or with the consent of, someone in an official capacity that intentionally inflicts severe physical or mental pain or suffering on a person for purposes such as intimidation and coercion or based on discrimination of any kind. In many cases, the severity of the suffering inflicted and the direct involvement or acquiescence of authorities have been extensively documented. The mistreatment of asylum seekers in Bulgarian camps is not the result of private acts of violence but of institutionalized violence by state structures that were meant to provide protection. Regarding the subjective elements of torture, the intent and purpose are evident in many reports, as will be demonstrated in the section on onward 'voluntary' returns. As we will later analyze, much of the inhumane treatment inflicted on asylum seekers in Bulgaria is rooted in discrimination based on migration status and forms part of a broader strategy that inflicts pain and suffering to pressure individuals into returning to their countries of origin.

C. LACK OF DUE PROCESS IN ASYLUM PROCEDURES

NNK has also been informed of a particularly concerning practice, in which people in Bulgaria describe being forced to claim asylum. One respondent, an unaccompanied minor from Syria, was taken to the Harmanli police station and interviewed for 5 hours, during which he reported that the translator repeatedly cursed at him.³¹ He was then taken to Lyubimets detention center, where he was detained for 24 days. He requested to be reunited with his sister in Sweden, but the police threatened to keep him in detention for 6 months and to deport him to Syria if he did not claim asylum in Bulgaria, even though it was not his intention to remain in the country.

The respondent's detention in Bulgaria not only contradicts the commitment to ending the detention of children³² but also violates several international and regional human rights standards, including the principle of the best interest of the child - enshrined in Art. 3 of the

³⁰ Source: https://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/ccpr118_2608_2015.pdf

³¹ Check full report at: <https://bloodyborders.org/testimonials/forced-asylum-claim-in-lubyimets/>

³² Bulgaria committed to ending the detention of children for migration-related reasons under the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Child-Immigration-Detention-in-the-EU-ENG.pdf>

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Art. 6 of the Dublin III Regulation - and the child's right to family life and reunification - present in Arts. 9 and 10 of the CRC, Art. 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and translated into Art. 8 of Dublin III, which stipulates that the Member State responsible for an unaccompanied minor's application is the one where a family member is legally present.³³ The European Court of Human Rights has consistently confirmed the severity of child detention, ruling that the detention of migrant children amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment, violating Art. 3 of the ECHR.³⁴

Many respondents, both within this study and met by NNK in the field, explicitly mention being forced to apply for asylum in Bulgaria, feeling they had no other choice and fearing a pushback or deportation to their country of origin if they refused.³⁵ One respondent reported to a partner organization in Germany that, while in Busmantsi in August 2022, guards pressured him and others in his group to claim asylum. The guards tried to force the group to write "I want asylum in Bulgaria" on pieces of paper and forcibly took their fingerprints. When the respondent asked the translator about the consequences of refusing to sign, the translator reportedly said that they would remain in detention for six months if they did not comply.

Similarly, another respondent, who was leaving Sofia to cross to Serbia in September 2024, was caught by the Bulgarian police, who forced him to apply for asylum. He tried to tell the police that he needed to go to Germany to be with his three sisters and to get surgery for his leg injury, but Bulgarian police didn't accept his explanation. He reports feeling like he had no choice but to apply for asylum in Bulgaria, because he was afraid that Bulgarian officers would push him back to Turkey, and from Turkey, he would be sent to Syria.

In October 2023, a Syrian respondent reported an incident in Sofia, where a group of Bulgarian police officers arrived in a vehicle and began randomly punching and kicking people.³⁶ This led to serious injuries for some of the people in the group, and the respondent was subsequently taken to a police station, where he was coerced into signing documents in

³³ Sources: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> and <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02013R0604-20130629>.

³⁴ Sources: <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Child-Immigration-Detention-in-the-EU-ENG.pdf> and https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/FS_Unaccompanied_migrant_minors_detention_ENG.

³⁵ Check full report at: <https://www.nonamekitchen.org/asylum-in-bulgaria-and-administrative-violence/>

³⁶ Check full report at: <https://bloodyborders.org/testimonials/a-guy-who-refused-to-leave-his-fingerprints-was-punched-and-kicked/>

Bulgarian without access to a translator. Despite repeatedly requesting one, the police refused to provide translation services. The following day, the group was brought to what he describes as ‘court’ and were forced to sign more paperwork without a translator, before being taken back to the police station to have their fingerprints taken. The respondent was transferred to the Busmantsi detention center, where additional interviews were conducted, including further fingerprinting and photographing. During this process, one person who refused to give their fingerprints was physically assaulted by the authorities. The respondent was unaware of the procedures he was subjected to and did not understand the content of the documents signed. Given the circumstances, it is suspected that these documents included an administrative detention order formalizing the group’s legal detention despite the failure to respect due process and meet the minimum legal standards and safeguards against arbitrary detention. The documents may have also been related to the registration and asylum application process, even though the respondent did not consent to submitting one. If the respondent later applies for asylum in another country, he could find himself registered in the Dublin system, potentially facing deportation back to Bulgaria.

Another Syrian respondent reported being pressured into what he describes as appealing an asylum rejection against his will while in Busmantsi. He stated that he was presented with two options: “either to open the asylum file again or to spend 18 months in jail”. Despite submitting documents to the translator that proved he was wanted for military service in Syria, the respondent’s appeal was rejected. The translator had promised to forward the translated documents to the court before the next hearing, but the respondent later learned that his documents were never shared with the adjudicator.

The lack of due process seems to particularly affect Syrians, as highlighted in NNK’s December 2024 report, “EU States Crack Down on Asylum Seekers After Al-Assad’s Fall”.³⁷ In this report, NNK compiled evidence of the consistent mismanagement of Syrian people’s asylum procedures, based on the unfounded assertion that Syria was then safe. For example, in October 2024, NNK had access to an applicant’s asylum request that was rejected on the grounds that, as a civilian, he could not prove he was personally affected by wanton violence in Syria. Another respondent, in February 2025, shared with NNK that he had observed that no Syrian nationals were receiving positive decisions on their asylum applications. He said:

“ Everyone is facing rejection, the children, the families, everyone. ”

- Respondent deported from Germany to Bulgaria

³⁷ Check full report at: <https://bloodyborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Report-EU-States-crack-down-on-Asylum-Seekers-after-al-Assads-fall-by-No-Name-Kitchen.pdf>

Rejection papers shared with NNK indicate that the SAR failed to consider the individual circumstances of each case when making decisions on those asylum applications. Instead, it relied on broad, inaccurate assumptions about the Syrian political landscape and safety. Several Syrian asylum seekers reported to NNK field reporters that their rejection decisions did not accurately reflect the information they had provided during interviews, and many people expressed distrust for the state translators. In many cases, key facts were misrepresented or omitted entirely. This failure to conduct individualized assessments and reliance on generalized assumptions, as well as the misrepresentation of information, violate asylum seekers' fundamental right to asylum and to a fair asylum procedure.

NGOs have raised concerns about due process issues in asylum procedures for years. Following an investigation in February 2025, Collective Aid found that many asylum seekers in Bulgaria are unable to access regular procedures or legal aid, leaving them without protection or due process.³⁸ Forced Migration Review has argued that “the large margin of discretion given to state officials regarding the time to register an asylum application has opened the door for corruption”.³⁹ Nearly a decade ago, Amnesty International called for the suspension of returns to Bulgaria to be extended, citing systemic violations of due process and the right to asylum.⁴⁰ The lack of access to fair asylum procedures is not a new development - for years, due process has been systematically undermined, reinforcing a discriminatory system that continues to jeopardize the right to asylum.

D. DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES

It's important to acknowledge the survivor's bias inherent to violence reporting. Testimonies can only be collected from those who make it out alive - and many do not. An investigation by Lighthouse Reporting in December 2023 estimated that at least 93 people died attempting to cross Bulgaria in 2022-2023.⁴¹ In addition to testimony collection, NNK field reporters are frequently first-hand witnesses to the violence and neglect that lead to these deaths. The *Frozen Lives* report,⁴² published in January 2025, documents one such case: three Egyptian minors were left to die in the Bulgarian forest, despite human rights defenders repeatedly alerting the authorities to the children's presence. Authorities not only ignored distress calls

³⁸ Source: <https://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2025/2/20/20qvubfxyct51bdibcibkixdivszdk>

³⁹ Source: <https://www.fmreview.org/ilareva/>

⁴⁰ Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/eur150022014en.pdf>

⁴¹ Source: <https://bulgaria.bordermonitoring.eu/2023/12/02/almost-100-people-died-on-their-way-through-bulgaria-within-2-years/>

⁴² Check full report at: https://bloodyborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NNK_Frozen-Lives_25-01-20_2.pdf

but also actively obstructed rescue efforts over several days. Evidence found at one of the death sites suggests border guards were present while one child was still alive.

Between July 1, 2024, and January 16, 2025 (the publication date of *Frozen Lives*), an independent emergency helpline for people in distress operated by independent human rights defenders received 96 calls, averaging almost one every two days, involving a total of 589 people on the move at risk of death. Since July 2023, search and rescue teams responding to these calls have found nine people already dead - including the three Egyptian boys. Five of those killed were children.⁴³ However, we are aware that these are only a fraction of the actual number of casualties at the border.

Frozen Lives underscores a critical reality: people flee Bulgaria not only because their rights are at risk but also because their lives are in danger. The report reveals a pattern of normalized violations by Bulgarian authorities that not only endangers the living but also denies dignity to the dead. We reference this report to emphasize that many who flee Bulgaria do so not only to escape violations of their rights but to survive.



"The sight is burned into my memory: his body lying in the snow, lifeless. His forehead was cold under my trembling hand. He couldn't have been older than sixteen. My heart broke into fragments as I realized the enormity of it all. We had warned them. We had shown them the video. But no one came. No one cared."

⁴³ NNK deliberately uses the word 'children' rather than minors, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. While the word 'minors' is often used in legal and regulatory contexts, we prioritize language that emphasizes the right to childhood - a right too often disregarded in the realities of life on the move.

LIFE IN BULGARIA AFTER DEPORTATION

After being forcibly returned to Bulgaria under the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers typically face one of two bleak outcomes: prolonged detention or destitution.

Usually, deportees who have had their asylum claims rejected and whose asylum procedures were completed before their return typically face prolonged detention in degrading conditions. Upon their return to Bulgaria, they are classified as illegal foreigners and issued an administrative return order to their country of origin, accompanied by an administrative detention order. This detention for the purpose of removal generally lasts for six months and can be prolonged for up to 18 months.⁴⁴

In detention, our research demonstrates that they will likely be subjected to pressure to ‘voluntarily’ return to their country of origin, as will be discussed in the next section. For those who are not unwillingly caught up in a ‘voluntary’ return scheme and still have the option to apply for asylum – such as individuals who claim to have new evidence to present to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) for a subsequent asylum application (Article 40, Asylum Procedures Directive 2013/32/EU) – we observe that their application is usually submitted from detention.

Meanwhile, deportees who have a pending asylum request in Bulgaria at the time of deportation can be left in complete limbo. They receive no shelter, food, or financial assistance from the Bulgarian government. Once asylum seekers leave Bulgaria, they lose access to reception centers upon return, even if their asylum application is still being processed. The same applies to asylum seekers who submit a subsequent asylum application after a Dublin deportation – the possibility of destitution, in this case, is admitted by the SAR themselves, who have explicitly stated (in response to questions from the European Commission) that **people in this situation will not have the right to social support, health insurance or accessible medical care, psychological assistance, or to obtain a registration card.**⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Source: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/detention-asylum-seekers/legal-framework-detention/duration-detention/>; See Article 44, par. 6, of the Law on Aliens in the Republic of Bulgaria (LARB)

⁴⁵ Source: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/factsheet_dublin_transfers_bg.pdf. See also: Asylum and Refugees Act, Art. 29, par. 7. Available at: https://aref.government.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/english/ASYLUM%20AND%20REFUGEE%20ACT_20.pdf

In some cases, individuals who can prove vulnerability may be granted entry into a reception center. Similarly, deportees who hold some form of protection status in Bulgaria are abandoned without support and face a high risk of homelessness.

OBSERVATIONS: DESTITUTION AFTER DEPORTATION

It is crucial to emphasize that the risk of destitution extends beyond the lack of access to reception centers for those who have protection status or a pending asylum request - those placed in camps or detention centers also struggle to meet basic survival needs, such as accessing adequate food and medical care. As the following accounts will show, deportees can also face heightened discrimination for having previously left Bulgaria, making their conditions even harsher than those of other asylum seekers in the country.

NNK received the testimony of an Egyptian man who was forcibly deported from Germany to Bulgaria in February 2024. He explained that he tried to enter a reception center to access accommodation and food as an asylum seeker registered in Bulgaria but was denied entry. Despite trying multiple reception centers across the country, he was repeatedly turned away and told by administrators to sleep on the streets. Frustrated, he asked:

“ Why did they request for me to be deported back (...)? They said, "Bring him, bring him, let him sleep in the streets". All of that because of the money that they receive because of me. ”

- Respondent who had been deported from Germany to Bulgaria

He shared a video with NNK showing camp authorities attempting to force him out of the center using batons. They reportedly told him: “this is not a hotel”.



Images taken from the video shared with NNK, where camp authorities force him out of the center with batons

A Syrian respondent reported, in February 2025, that he didn't get any assistance to obtain housing, healthcare, education, language learning, or work after being deported to Bulgaria from Germany and was not allowed back in the camp. According to him, people must manage their lives themselves after being deported and have no access to healthcare. He said:

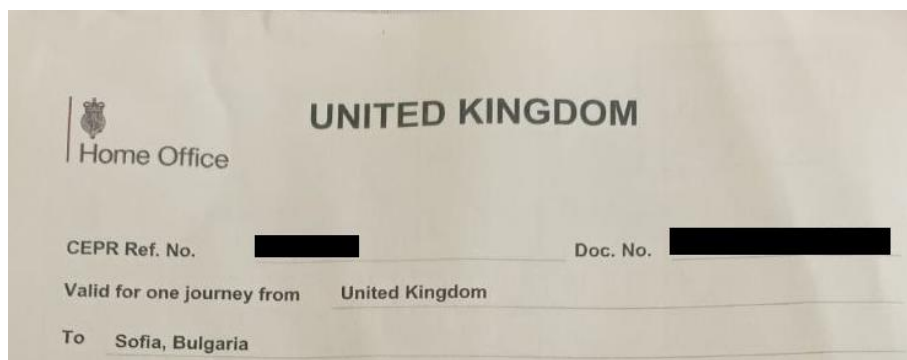
“ They released me but left me to face my destiny without any help. ”

- Respondent who had been deported from Germany to Bulgaria

In January 2025, NNK also collected testimony from a man who had recently been deported from the UK to Bulgaria. He was placed on a charter flight with 6 other people and, upon arriving in Sofia, he was taken to a room at the airport where his papers were stamped. A Bulgarian Migration Directorate officer reportedly handed him a document to sign, which was not translated, and the respondent had no understanding of its contents. Afterward, the officer directed him toward the exit.

He told NNK that he had nowhere to go and did not understand how to access reception facilities. He contacted an organization in Sofia for clarification, where he was informed that

he had been granted ‘subsidiary protection’ status - he was not aware of what that meant. He was told that would not receive additional accommodation or support. **The respondent was told by several others with subsidiary protection status that it was not worth going to the reception center to ask for accommodation, because they would refuse him entry, as it had happened to them.**



Reflecting on his deportation from the UK to Bulgaria, he described his experience as feeling like he had been “kicked out of heaven and into hell” and taken from a place where he was supported and helped to one where his existence is not acknowledged. NNK reporters continue to assist this respondent, who often sleeps on the streets of Sofia and shares that he scavenges through trash to find food.

Respondent’s record of deportation from the UK

“ **...kicked out of heaven and into hell...** ”

- Respondent who had been deported from the UK to Bulgaria

Another testimony provided to NNK by a partner organization in Germany in February 2025 echoed the threat of destitution faced by deportees. The respondent reported that after being deported to Bulgaria, he was immediately detained in Busmantsi, and upon his release, he was left homeless. Documents, shared with NNK with the respondent’s consent, confirmed his release from Busmantsi. The document includes the phrase “The foreigner will reside at”, and “Contact phone number”, but both fields were left blank. This suggests that while administrative measures may be in place for follow-up after detention, the reality offers no real social or legal support. Officials appear indifferent to the serious risk of homelessness and destitution faced by asylum seekers upon their release from Busmantsi after deportation.

МИНИСТЕРСТВО НА ВЪТРЕШНИТЕ РАБОТИ
ДИРЕКЦИЯ „МИГРАЦИЯ“

Рег. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] г.



СЛУЖЕБНА БЕЛЕЖКА

Днес, [REDACTED] г., във връзка с разпоредбите на глава IV, член 15, параграф 4-6 от Директива 2008/115/ЕО и на основание, предложение Рег.№5364р-25874/11.10.2023г., издавам настоящата служебна бележка на [REDACTED] [REDACTED] роден на [REDACTED] г., гражданин на Сирия, [REDACTED] в уверение за това, че същият е освободен от Специален дом за временно настаняване на чужденци - София.
Чужденецът ще пребивава на адрес:
Телефон за контакт:.....

Documents shared with NNK by a respondent. The form - states “The foreigner will reside at”, and “Contact phone number”, but both fields were left blank.

НАЧАЛНИК НА
ОТДЕЛ „СДВНЧ – СОФИЯ“
ПРИ ДИРЕКЦИЯ „МИГРАЦИЯ“ МВР
КОМИСАР

Юри Николов



After being deported from Germany to Bulgaria in December 2024, a respondent was instructed to go to Harmanli camp, which he immediately did. However, the paperwork given to him indicated that he would arrive three days after his actual arrival date, and upon reaching the camp, the security staff told him it was closed. They mocked him, saying:

“ **The camp is closed, go back to Syria.** ”

- Respondent who had been deported from Germany to Bulgaria

With no other option to avoid sleeping on the streets, the respondent had to rely on friends inside the camp to help him find shelter. Once inside, he faced additional challenges, particularly in accessing healthcare for a disability that requires surgery. He expressed concern about the medical treatment in Bulgaria due to his previous negative experience.

Another respondent described **severe destitution within the reception camp** upon his return to Bulgaria. After being deported from Germany to Bulgaria and transferred to a reception center, he faced racism from camp employees and deprivation, particularly regarding access to food. A camp employee reportedly said that because he had ‘run away from our camp’ and ‘gone to another European country’ he could not just come back and eat their food. Despite repeated requests, he was denied access to food for several days. He attempted to report the mistreatment and was dismissed – the same employee warned him that he could do whatever he wanted, and no one would listen. The hardship and deprivation experienced by the respondent goes beyond access to food. He reports that medical care was inadequate and the only doctor at the camp prescribed nothing but painkillers. Since early February, the camp had no heating or warm water, leaving residents to endure freezing temperatures for at least a month at the time of his testimony.

Another respondent, who was undergoing medical treatment in Germany, was deported to Bulgaria while still in need of care. Upon arrival in Bulgaria, he was denied access to necessary medication and healthcare. The camp authorities refused to take him to the hospital even though his medication was running out, telling him that SAR wouldn't assist him and that he would need to pay for the treatment himself. He also reported that his room was excessively humid, moldy, and damp, and requested either a room change or a heater. He was told that if he didn't like the conditions, he could “rent a room in a hotel” or “go back to Germany”. The only doctor who visits the Harmanli camp once a week refused to help him, stating that, because the respondent was new to the camp and his name wasn't in the system, he would not receive support. The respondent then tried to address the issue with camp management, but they also refused to help, repeatedly telling him:

“ **Go back to Germany or Turkey if you want treatment; you won't get it here.** ”

- Respondent in need of medical treatment who was deported to Bulgaria

He informs that he would need to stay in the camp for several months for his name to appear in the system before he could access healthcare and expressed the feeling of abandonment. The respondent is still without medication, worsening his chronic health condition.

The cases described above show how destitution is present, in one way or another, in different types of deportation cases - **whether deportees remain under state custody, are sent to open camps, or are left to live on the streets and provide for themselves, they will face severe deprivation of their most basic needs, in particular regarding access to adequate food, physical and psychological healthcare, shelter, financial support, and access to information.** As it has been shown in this section, even in cases where people are sent to camps upon deportation, the material conditions of such facilities are well-below the minimum required by Art. 17 of the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU and basic human rights standards.

The real risk of inhuman and degrading treatment due to the risk of homelessness and destitution upon return to Bulgaria has been grounds for national European courts to stop deportations to Bulgaria in the past.⁴⁶ Namely, German courts have ruled that persons returned would face a real risk of a violation of Art. 3 ECHR or Art. 4 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights due to the high risk of destitution, exploitation, and utter lack of access to employment and integration opportunities, as well as the lack of plans to improve these conditions.⁴⁷ A decade after these courts recognized the severe destitution faced by people deported to Bulgaria, conditions do not seem to have improved. **Severe destitution is not only a likelihood for those deported to Bulgaria, regardless of their protection status - the policy of abandonment for those returned to Bulgaria with a pending asylum application makes destitution a systemic issue.**

OBSERVATIONS: ONWARD REFOULEMENT

In 2023, Bulgaria returned 515 'third-country nationals' to a third country following an order to leave Bulgaria. In 2024, this number increased to 930 people.⁴⁸ Around 15% of the returns

⁴⁶ Source: <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-Right-to-housing-for-beneficiaries-of-international-protection.pdf>

⁴⁷ Source: <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-Right-to-housing-for-beneficiaries-of-international-protection.pdf>. See footnote 17.

⁴⁸ Source: Eurostat:

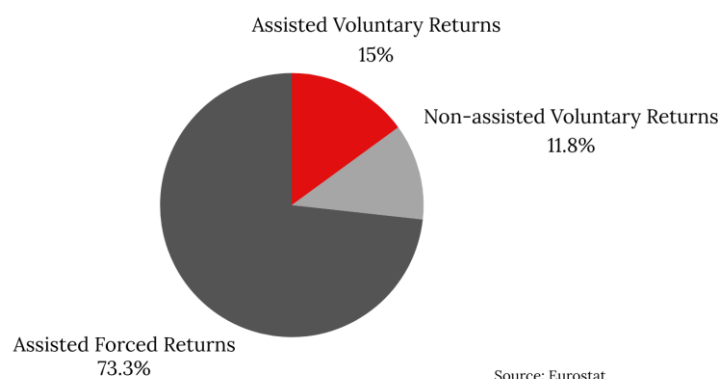
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eirtn1/default/table?lang=en

from Bulgaria to third countries were Assisted Voluntary Returns. This category typically refers to cases where people ‘choose’ to return to their origin country, or another third country, with organized support - usually through governmental schemes or schemes run by organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

These ‘voluntary’ return schemes are presented as an ostensibly ‘dignified’ alternative to forced deportation,⁴⁹ even offering financial aid or reintegration programs upon return. The contradiction lies in the ‘voluntary’ element: **a false dilemma is created between the options of (a.) returning voluntarily or (b.) returning by force**, where the person is returned either way, there is not a genuinely ‘voluntary’ component. This criticism has been raised by many NGOs,⁵⁰ as **voluntary returns often seem to serve as a pretext for more violent deportations**. Such issues are exacerbated by the blatant flaws in voluntary return schemes: despite the promise of eased reintegration, the IOM itself admits that genuine reintegration goes far beyond their mandate and that many people do not receive the financial aid that is promised.⁵¹

The claim to ‘voluntariness’ must also be contextualized within a violent border regime and an inadequate reception system. When third-country nationals face prolonged detention, inadequate asylum procedures, substandard living conditions, and systemic neglect (as is evidenced in Bulgaria), the ‘choice’ to return becomes less about genuine agency and more about escaping intolerable conditions. By emphasizing ‘assistance’ and ‘choice’, voluntary return programs ignore the abhorrent conditions that push people to accept the return. It also permits states to frame their migration control measures as compassionate, while avoiding accountability for the inhumane conditions and treatment which ultimately force people to leave.

DEPORTATIONS OF THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS FROM BULGARIA TO THIRD-COUNTRIES (2024)



⁴⁹ Source: <https://www.iom.int/return-and-reintegration>

⁵⁰ Source: <https://www.fmreview.org/ar/koch/>

⁵¹ Source: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/19/paying-for-migrants-to-go-back-home-how-the-eu-s-voluntary-return-scheme-is-failing-the-de>

For example, in February 2025, NNK received the testimony of a Syrian detained at Busmantsi detention center, who described severe medical neglect during his time there. Despite suffering from a disability resulting from multiple surgeries, he was denied access to proper medication, pain relief, and essential physiotherapy, causing his condition to worsen significantly. He explained that this medical neglect, combined with the deterioration of his health, hindered his ability to properly complete his asylum application while in detention. He stated:

“ The continuous severe nerve pain, worsening joint problems due to cold exposure, and the overall lack of proper healthcare have made my situation unbearable. ”

- Respondent requesting a voluntary return to Syria

For these reasons, the respondent requested an assisted voluntary return. While we do not seek to undermine the respondent’s own agency, we include this testimony to exemplify the nature of ‘voluntary’ returns and contextualize decisions regarding returns within a reception system marked by extreme neglect.

The practice of coercing asylum seekers into so-called ‘voluntary’ returns through deception and pressure - forcing them to return to a place where they face serious harm - constitutes a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*. This foundational norm of international law “guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm”.⁵² This principle is explicitly recognized in the Refugee Convention, the UNCAT, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) and also derives from other primary human rights obligations, such as the right to life and to not be subjected to torture, found in Arts. 6 and 7 of the ICCPR and Arts. 2 and 3

⁵² Source:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>

of the ECHR.⁵³ The duty of *non-refoulement* is also regarded as having attained status of *jus cogens*, which is binding on all states.

A. COERCION INTO VOLUNTARY RETURNS

While the ‘voluntary’ nature of return schemes is inherently questionable, NNK has also gathered extremely concerning evidence suggesting that many instances of voluntary returns are signed under duress. Based on the testimonies collected, this pressure often begins with a first attempt to offer financial compensation or exert ‘positive’ pressure on the respondent. When these tactics fail, respondents are subject to threats of detention/violence and verbal/psychological abuse. This coercive process was also briefly referenced in a 2023 report by Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche, which states that: “in order to obtain the interviewees’ consent, they are promised sums of money and fanciful offers of work or study; then the officials threaten to further prolong detention if repatriation is not accepted”.⁵⁴

The pressure of this nature was also a key focus of NNK’s December 2024 report, titled “EU States Crack Down on Asylum Seekers After Al-Assad’s Fall”.⁵⁵ On Friday, December 13, 2024, NNK activists met with asylum seekers staying in the Harmanli Reception Center in Bulgaria and were informed that earlier that day, around two hundred Syrians were forcibly taken for interrogation at the center administration. Through threats or the use of force, Bulgarian authorities tried to coerce them into signing documents. Some of the interviewees at the time did not understand the content of the papers they signed but believed they could constitute voluntary return agreements. Notably, none of the interviewees, whether in the Harmanli or Banya camps, were allowed to keep copies of the documents or take photographs of them.

These people were also reportedly interrogated about their views on the Assad regime, with questions such as: “Are you happy about the fall of Assad?”; “Is Syria now safe for you?”; “Is there no war?”; “How did you feel when Bashar al-Assad fell?”; “How did you feel when Syria was liberated?”. One asylum seeker explained: “You naturally say to them ‘yes’ so this evidence is used against you and to return you to Syria”. In a later testimony of the same incident, a respondent recalls seeing a pile of paperwork on the table. When he expressed

⁵³ Anderson, A., Foster, M., Lambert, H., & McAdam, J. (2019). Imminence in refugee and human rights law: A misplaced notion for international protection. *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 68(1), 111–140. doi:10.1017/s0020589318000398

⁵⁴ Source: <https://www.meltingpot.org/download/497667/?tmstv=1693855032>, p.14

⁵⁵ Check full report at: <https://bloodyborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Report-EU-States-crack-down-on-Asylum-Seekers-after-al-Assads-fall-by-No-Name-Kitchen.pdf>

that he did not want to return to Syria, they handed him one of the documents and asked him to sign it. He does not know what he signed and was not allowed to keep a copy.

It seems that, in addition to using the fall of Assad to coerce people into signing documents, the regime change may have been exploited as an opportunity to reject asylum claims based on leadership change rather than assessing the facts of each case individually, further restricting access to asylum. A few weeks later, a source inside the Harmanli Reception Center reported that dozens of asylum seekers in Harmanli received rejections, with around 30 occurring in a single day. NNK has been working on accessing a relevant number of such rejection documents to understand whether and how these rejections were impacted by the forcible interviews and signatures episode a few weeks before.

In addition to the routine pressure reported in reception centers, many respondents have informed us of targeted, personal coercion to sign ‘voluntary’ return documents. For example, one respondent reported to NNK in February 2025 that, while detained in Busmantsi, a translator asked him to sign two documents, and said that he would be back in 3 days to explain what the documents meant. Together, the detainees who received these documents deduced that one of them was a detention order, and the other was a ‘voluntary’ return document. He was told that if he did not sign the documents, the authorities would sign it their “own way” anyway.

NNK supported a Moroccan man, who was deported in February 2025 after being pressured into signing a ‘voluntary’ return agreement. He told NNK that he was arrested on a train, taken to detention, and informed that there was an ‘80-90% chance’ that he would not be deported. The respondent later reported that officials forced him to sign a ‘voluntary’ return document. Despite NNK’s efforts to help the respondent revoke his consent, he was returned to Morocco against his will.

In another testimony collected by NNK, a man experienced a chain pushback after being forced to sign documents. He reports that, during an interrogation, the camp management repeatedly insulted him:

“ They said to me, ‘You are a terrorist and you are ISIS, why did you come here?’ ”

- Respondent who experienced a chain pushback

The respondent states that he and others were threatened with detention if they refused to sign a document, even though its contents were never disclosed to them. Under extreme pressure, he was coerced into signing without the opportunity to photograph or translate it. A week later, he was taken to the Harmanli police station, where he was beaten and stripped completely naked. He was then transported to the Greek border, where he was forced into the forest and left stranded for four days. Eventually, he was apprehended by the Greek border police. The police took him in a van to Evros, and to a river which he was then forced to cross. On the Turkish side of the river, further police were waiting who took them to detention in Edirne. He spent 3 days in this facility before being transported to Syria on a bus with approximately 60 other people. At the border with Syria, they were forced to sign a paper stating they would not enter Turkey for the next 4 years.

Since NNK works directly with people on the move rather than national institutions, we are rarely able to confirm the content of such documents, particularly because respondents are rarely allowed to keep copies or take pictures. However, NNK has documented reports of individuals experiencing refoulement after signing paperwork. Whether or not these were voluntary return documents, compelling asylum seekers to sign documents without a clear explanation or proper translation violates their right to informed consent and due process, undermining the integrity of the asylum procedure.

Further evidence suggests that a key tactic for pressuring people into 'voluntary' returns is the threat of prolonged detention. Multiple respondents reported being threatened with lengthy detention if they stayed in Bulgaria. Given several high-profile cases of arbitrary and prolonged detention of asylum seekers - such as that of Abdulrahman Al-Khalidi, who has been held in Busmantsi for over three years - many asylum seekers in Bulgaria seem to understand that these threats can indeed materialize, further intensifying their coercive effect.

NNK reporters collected the testimony of a Syrian man, in February 2025, who had been detained in Busmantsi. Despite holding a valid residence permit, and having an employment contract in Bulgaria, he was arrested in his residence in Sofia without ever being informed about the reasons for his arrest. He stated that he had no criminal record or legal issues in either Bulgaria or Syria, but suspected that a man he had previously clashed with had reported him to the police. He was taken to the Busmantsi detention center and the authorities refused to disclose any information on the reasons for his arrest, saying it was 'confidential'. Officials threatened him with an extended stay at Busmantsi if he did not agree to return to Syria. He expressed grave concern over the possibility of deportation:

“ I am very afraid of deportation, and I think a lot about this matter. ”

- Respondent experiencing pressure to accept a voluntary return

Viktor Lilov of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee stated in an interview with InfoMigrants: “I know a Syrian who has been in detention for a year and a half, he was rejected from asylum, after fleeing military service in Syria from the Assad regime” - in 18 months of detention, “his lawyer never had access to this note. He does not know what his client has been accused of, nor how to defend him accordingly”.⁵⁶ Similarly, another respondent, who was detained in Busmantsi for two years until February 2024, reported experiencing frequent psychological harassment, physical violence, and lack of access to information during his detention in Busmantsi. He told NNK:

“ I was personally threatened multiple times to be deported to Syria. They even explicitly told me: “We will not let you live in the European Union if you don’t do what we want”. I just wanted to know the charges against me, but I didn’t even find out about them during the trial. ”

- Respondent experiencing pressure to accept a voluntary return

The lack of information regarding the reasons for detention violates a plethora of international and regional human rights instruments and commitments undertaken by Bulgaria, including the right to liberty and prohibition of arbitrary detention enshrined in Art. 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Art. 5 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), which also carries the obligation to inform detainees of the reasons for their detention - this means that not only must any deprivation

⁵⁶ Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58185/migrants-deprived-of-their-fundamental-human-rights-in-bulgarian-detention-centers>

of liberty be legally justified, but the state must also provide clear, timely, and understandable information to those detained. The lack of transparency observed in many cases reported also interferes with due process, guaranteed by Art. 14 of the ICCPR, Art. 10 of the UDHR, Art. 6 of the ECHR and Art. 47 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Another respondent reported that Officers of the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (SANS) said things like “I will ruin you. I will ruin your future”, “You’ll stay in prison for a very long period”, and even asked him “What is the most precious thing you’ve got? Your kids? I can assure you you’ll never see them again”. These brutal statements were professed during extended interrogations, which often lasted multiple hours. They also reportedly made statements about his chances of getting asylum in Bulgaria: “You don’t have any chance and, if you request to be transferred to a third country, I’ll do all I can to stop it”. He informed NNK that this harassment continued even after he repeatedly pleaded for psychological support from SAR and the immigration police, which drove him to attempt suicide. He stated to NNK reporters:

“ They tried to put tremendous pressure on me, I tried to commit suicide because of it, but I did not remain silent and did not stop confronting them and refusing their interrogations despite everything. ”

- Respondent experiencing pressure to accept a voluntary return

These testimonies reveal a systematic pattern of withholding or distorting crucial information from asylum seekers to instill feelings of hopelessness and fear. Many are falsely led to believe that they have no remaining avenues for appeal or that forced return is inevitable - this practice can ultimately lead them to sign documents they don’t understand and ‘accept’ ‘voluntary’ returns, undermining the integrity of the asylum process. By exploiting state-constructed confusion about their legal status, authorities manipulate asylum seekers into ‘agreeing’ to return to a third country. **The complete lack of transparency and access to clear information about judicial and administrative procedures leaves asylum seekers unable to make informed decisions regarding their claims, further stripping them of their rights and agency.**

Coercion into ‘voluntary’ returns functions not only through direct threats but through a variety of other human rights violations. The state of physical and psychological distress

curated by the Bulgarian asylum system often leads to situations in which individuals give in to the extreme pressure to return to their countries and often don't have the chance to revoke their consent to the return. This psychological coercion is exacerbated by the abhorrent conditions in Busmantsi described in the first section of this report: respondents frequently reported that the first attempt of coercion into taking a 'voluntary' return occurred after a few days in Busmantsi, which could be an attempt by Bulgarian authorities to exploit sentiments of fear and apprehension about the inhuman conditions in the detention center to intimidate or coerce people into taking return offers.

This issue has also been reported by the newspaper *Enab Baladi* in November 2024, which stated that a group of asylum seekers in the Busmantsi detention centre had been given 'two options': to sign a 6 months-long detention order that could be extended to 18 months, or to sign a return agreement to Syria.⁵⁷ One interviewee told the newspaper:

“ **If we remain in the center this winter, we will die.** ”

- Respondent experiencing pressure to accept a voluntary return, speaking to *Enab Baladi*

He states that the conditions were so poor (lacking food, clothing, and medical care) that the threat of an 18-month detention felt like a threat to his own life.

As explained in previous sections, the conditions and mistreatment inside Busmantsi violate the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment - and potentially the prohibition of torture - in themselves. Yet, **combined with the threat of prolonged detention and the lack of access to accurate information about people's asylum procedures or chances, the abhorrent conditions in detention create a heightened state of fear and vulnerability.** Those conditions do not seem to be purely coincidental, but rather a tool to coerce asylum seekers into 'voluntarily' returning to countries where they may face persecution, torture, or even death.

The calculated physical and psychological pressure targeted at people on the move that aims to coerce them into 'voluntary' returns may fall well into the definition of torture present in Art. 1 of the UNCAT. The severe mental anguish caused intentionally by these tactics, the direct involvement of state authorities, coupled with the repeated and systematic

⁵⁷ Source: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/11/syrians-in-bulgaria-face-deportation-or-imprisonment/>

use of other human rights violations as tactics to cause further mental and physical suffering - all to reach the state agents' purpose of coercion, and for reasons based on discrimination against asylum seekers, suggests the threshold for torture is met. These actions directly and exclusively target asylum seekers due to their migration status and take place against a background of discrimination that permeates Bulgarian institutions and taints the national asylum system. The horrifying practices reported by the respondents shed light on the gravity of what is taking place: **Bulgarian authorities are consistently tormenting asylum seekers, then exploiting fear and confusion to push people towards deportation under the guise of consent.**

B. COERCION AFTER DEPORTATION TO BULGARIA

Those previously deported to Bulgaria from other European countries are also subjected to the same coercive tactics explained in the previous section. For example, in July 2024, NNK supported an Egyptian man who had been forcibly deported from the Netherlands to Bulgaria. He was held in the Busmantsi detention center to await further deportation to Egypt due to the denial of his asylum request. After being held in Busmantsi for several days, he was informed by officers of the Bulgarian Migration Directorate that if he did not agree to go back to Egypt 'voluntarily', he would be detained for 6 months and then deported at the end of the detention anyway. He was told that he had no opportunities left for appeal and that his only choices were to go willingly or to face extended detention in Busmantsi and then be forcibly removed. This turned out not to be true, and he was released from Busmantsi following a court decision.

A young woman assisted by NNK was recently deported from Germany to Bulgaria under the Dublin Regulation. Immediately after she arrived at Busmantsi, she reported being pressured into signing a 'voluntary' return agreement. Authorities reportedly threatened her with 18 months of detention if she refused to 'voluntarily' return. Due to her heightened vulnerability and fragile psychological state, which resulted from her prior experience in a Bulgarian Reception Center, as confirmed by a local Bulgarian organization, she felt coerced into signing the return agreement. Consequently, she was swiftly deported to Syria, despite having no close family ties or the means to support herself there.

In February 2025, NNK received the testimony of a Syrian man who had experienced two deportations to Bulgaria. The first deportation happened after he had lived in Germany for a year and a half. Upon arrival in Bulgaria, he was detained in what he describes as a 'prison' for 20 days and was informed that he was detained due to alleged 'violations of the law of the European Union and the Dublin Regulation'. Due to the bad treatment experienced, he

fled Bulgaria a second time and went to Belgium. The Belgian authorities told him: “You have residence in Bulgaria, so you have to go and stay there”. The respondent stressed:

“ I don’t have anything in Bulgaria - no home, no people, nothing. ”

- Respondent deported from Belgium to Bulgaria

Having previously experienced the use of force during his first deportation from Germany, he decided to return to Bulgaria voluntarily, which did not help him escape violence. He reported that when he arrived at the Sofia airport, Bulgarian police arrested him again and tied his hands and body with chains. He describes that he felt he was being treated as if he was a criminal who had done something catastrophic. That same day, the Bulgarian police forced him to sign a document, despite him not understanding its content. Only later he learned that he had unknowingly agreed to his own return to Syria - although he is still not aware of the exact content of the document he signed.

One respondent shared with NNK that, after being deported from Germany to Bulgaria in November 2024, he returned to the Harmanli camp. This individual was among the countless asylum seekers subjected to pressure to sign documents in December 2024 and declare that Syria was a safe country after the fall of Assad, a situation detailed in the previous section. He expressed a deep fear of being sent back to Syria, particularly because he believes that the document he signed may have been a voluntary return agreement. His fear stems from a personal risk of persecution, which is often overlooked in the simplified narrative that Syria is now safe.

Another respondent, who was also deported from Germany to Bulgaria, reported to a partner organization that upon arrival in Bulgaria, his fingerprints were immediately taken, and he was transferred to Busmantsi. There, he was reportedly forced to sign a 6-month detention order. After several days in Busmantsi, he was interviewed by officers who gave him two options: either return to Syria or remain detained for the entire 6-month period for which he had signed the detention order. He was threatened that this detention period would be extended by another 6 months or even a year. He further reported that he experienced discrimination within the asylum reception system as a result of his previous deportation. Despite his attempts to regularize his status and get a temporary ID card, his application was refused twice - the third time, he was provided with a lawyer who did not even attend his court hearing. Officers told him:

“ You don’t want Bulgaria, and you have already been to Germany once. ”

- Respondent deported from Germany to Bulgaria

This testimony suggests that the lack of due process in Bulgarian asylum procedures may be exacerbated by discrimination faced by respondents as a result of leaving Bulgaria and coming back. This discrimination contributes to the psychological landscape of fear and serves as a further means of coercion. **Deportation to Bulgaria may, therefore, not only place individuals at risk of being exposed to torture and refoulement but it worsens the likelihood of these rights violations occurring in comparison to those who have remained in Bulgaria.** This is also evidenced in the case of the respondent who was denied access to healthcare on the discriminatory grounds that he had previously been in Germany, as explored in the section on destitution.

The findings highlight that the risk of onward refoulement from Bulgaria, which could expose asylum seekers to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in their countries of origin, is no longer the sole concern. In fact, the threat of torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment is already present within Bulgarian territory itself. As such, deportations to Bulgaria may violate Art. 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Art. 3 of the ECHR, Art. 5 of the UDHR, and Article 1 of the UNCAT, Art. 7 of the ICCPR, Art. 22 of the CRC, Art. 19 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, among other legal provisions.

CONCLUSION

Every single respondent in this investigation who had been deported to Bulgaria from a European country experienced either destitution, onward refoulement, or both. While NNK acknowledges that the sample size is limited, this limitation is not incidental - many deportees remain unheard because they are trapped in a system of **torture and extreme abuse** in detention centers, **total isolation**, preventing access to legal aid and human rights monitors, and **even death**, as a consequence of state-inflicted harm and negligence. It is also particularly concerning that, throughout the course of this investigation, many respondents dismissed our questions about coercion with answers like: *“Of course, they tried to force us to sign voluntary return papers”*. This reveals a dangerous normalization of violence, reinforcing serious concerns for asylum seekers who are stripped of their right to protection by a system designed to fail them.

The growing number of deportations to Bulgaria from other European countries reveals a deeper layer of complicity. Under the Dublin Regulation and related agreements, European nations routinely return asylum seekers to Bulgaria, under the false presumption that it is a ‘safe’ country. Yet, testimonies gathered and NNK’s continuous observations on the ground tell a different story: **individuals deported to Bulgaria face an imminent and serious risk of destitution and extreme deprivation of their basic needs, as well as the threat of onward refoulement.**

Destitution is not an accident but structured into Bulgaria’s reception of deported people. Bulgaria has made clear that depriving deportees of basic needs is part of its institutionalized approach. **It is also clear that the practice of refoulement occurs through coercive pressure to agree to ‘voluntarily return’ to an unsafe country or through the unfair and systematic rejection of asylum claims due to procedural deficiencies.** Coercing people into ‘voluntary’ returns is routine in the management of asylum claims. In violent and inhumane detention conditions, people face an impossible choice: endure indefinite abuse or agree to return to danger. **Violations of the prohibition of torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment are present in every stage of this system:** in the systemic destitution, in the conditions and abuse experienced in detention and reception centers, and in the practice of coercion and refoulement.

While the Bulgarian authorities may be the direct perpetrators of the physical and psychological harm inflicted on deportees, states that knowingly return individuals to the hands of an abusive system are enablers of this harm. Comments by the European Commission make it clear that the violence perpetrated by Bulgarian officials is not just a national issue but reflects a broader European ethos - this is evident, for example, in Ursula von der Leyen’s enthusiastic endorsement of Bulgaria’s Schengen accession, despite

widespread reports of abuse.⁵⁸ However, the evidence presented suggests that deportation to Bulgaria threatens the principle of non-refoulement and undermines the rights and liberties that European states pride themselves on. Despite being an EU member state bound by EU human rights frameworks, Bulgaria has consistently breached its human rights obligations towards asylum seekers, demonstrating that it is an unsafe destination for this group.

Whether or not the abundant evidence of a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment or torture faced by asylum seekers returned to Bulgaria has been recognized by European states, states should prioritize acting in the best interests of vulnerable individuals. The Dublin III Regulation includes discretionary clauses that allow states to decide whether to transfer an asylum seeker to another EU member state and examine their application for international protection even if that other state is formally responsible for the claim under the Dublin system. Article 17 grants countries the discretion to consider humanitarian factors when reviewing asylum applications. **Deportations to Bulgaria are not mandatory or justifiable - and they must end.**

⁵⁸ Source: <https://x.com/vonderleyen/status/1764587430319890910>

With thanks to all those who have collaborated and shared their stories with us to make this report possible.

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