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GROWING HOSTILITY AGAINST ASYLUM IN EUROPE



**Topic of the
Month Europe
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Introduction

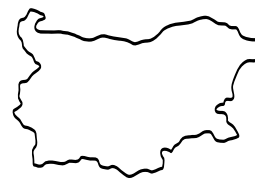
To mark the first anniversary of the New EU Pact on Migration, this article provides snapshots of current developments on the ground, particularly in Europe's border regions. In response to the increasing hostility faced by people on the move across the EU, it highlights the urgent need for action and policy change. Migration has become a deeply polarising issue, often framed through opposing political ideologies. This divisive discourse serves as a harmful and dehumanising tool, reinforcing the "othering" of people on the move. As political groups continue to weaponize migration to further their agendas, those most affected by increasingly hostile policies are left in precarious and vulnerable situations.



Image by Henrikas Mackevicius sourced from [Pexels](#)

This article takes a look at examples of hostile environments people are faced with, across different European countries. We explore the measures Bulgaria is taking to conform with the New Pact, and Poland's move to suspend the right to claim asylum. We also assess recent trends in Italy and Greece, including the ongoing issue of illegal pushbacks, which continues to be a persistent violation of human rights. This article also examines the situation faced by many Syrian people with refugee status, across Europe, in light of the fall of Assad's regime.

Bulgarian Measures to Conform to the New Pact on Migration: A Border Country's Approach



The European Commission (EC) adopted a Common Implementation Plan for the New Pact on Migration in June 2024; European Union Member States were expected to prepare their respective national plans by December 2024. After a quiet preparation process which left no space for the participation of civil society, Bulgaria published its national plan for implementing the EU Pact on 20 December 2024.

Bulgaria already had crisis response plans with respect to the situations at the borders with Greece and Turkey. A crisis response activates in the case of having 250-300 irregular crossings per day or when the facilities for hosting asylum applicants exceed 70% of their capacities.

The Bulgarian plan to implement the New Pact makes explicit reference to the increased number of returns in the last years and the European pressure to enforce deportations through charter flights, as well as the recent enhancement of the participation of Frontex in return procedures. The new regulations explicitly transfer the task of preliminarily screening third-country nationals and carrying out asylum border procedures to countries on the EU external borders.

Specifically and as explained in a recent report by the [Centre for Legal Aid "Voice in Bulgaria"](#), the Bulgarian implementation plan foresees :

- Building two new closed facilities for border screening, to be run by the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior: one in the town of Elhovo, close to the Turkish-Bulgarian border, with a capacity for 100 people, and another one in the town of Dragoman, close to the Serbian-Bulgarian border, with a capacity for 50 people.

- Systematizing screening inside the national territory and carrying out border procedures in the premises of the pre-removal detention centres of Busmantsi (Sofia) and Lyubimets, as well as the so-called accommodation centre in Elhovo.
- Systematizing screening for unaccompanied minors in two centres, one in Elhovo and one in Sofia.
- Introducing a mandatory border procedure that will directly label certain categories of applicants as not authorized to enter the state territory.
- Setting up a closed centre for “border procedures”, with a capacity for 585 people.
- Hiring new staff to implement screening and asylum border procedures.
- Reviewing the existing legislation and rules regarding detention, alternatives to detention and measures against absconding.
- Legislative changes to allow for the issuance of asylum rejections together with return orders in a single procedure, to accelerate and simplify returns (so far, Bulgarian authorities have been issuing asylum rejections and return orders in separate decisions, subject to separate appeal procedures).
- Expanding the scope of accelerated procedures and enhancing the efficiency of returns, by upgrading the technical capacities of the country to enforce them. A coordination centre will be established to manage return procedures.
- Enhancing forced transfers from other Member States, by upgrading human resources and technical capacities; introducing a new asylum and migration code planned to serve as a primary reference; and reviewing the existing legislation to limit absconding, prioritize family reunification cases, provide legal aid in transfer cases and adapt to new administrative deadlines.
- Establishing an administrative authority for managing relocations, to comply with the obligations of Bulgaria under the ‘solidarity’ mechanism.

These measures will strengthen and articulate the fortification of Europe’s Eastern borders by means of forced detention, accelerated expulsion procedures and an important reduction of options to apply for asylum.



Poland: Suspending the Right to Claim Asylum

On the [27th of March 2025, the Polish government passed a law that suspended the right to claim asylum at the Belarus/Polish border.](#) This is a violation of European and International law and is likely to create a dire situation for the people on the move at this border who are already facing harsh conditions and violence.

In this section, we will provide more context and explanation of what people on the move experience at this increasingly dangerous border, which has long been a zone for pushbacks and rejections, showing it to be another iteration of the hostility towards people on the move across Europe.

This Isn't New

"Since 2021, when the route from Belarus into Poland became more popular as a result of visas offered by Belarus and increasingly few safe routes to seek asylum in Europe, Poland has adopted a policy of pushbacks despite this being illegal under international law, European law and the Polish Constitution."

In 2021 and 2022, [reports](#) began detailing the violence occurring at the Polish-Belarusian border. The Polish authorities have been literally and often violently pushing people back to the other side of the Belarusian border, they have also allowed for expedited expulsions and blocked access to the territory (otherwise known as the Exclusion Zone), preventing NGOs and other humanitarian organisations from providing aid to the people there.

"local actors have recorded nearly 20,000 requests for help from refugees, migrants and asylum seekers crossing into Poland. Nearly 9,000 violent pushbacks to Belarus were experienced by individuals, including pregnant women and young adults."

Organisations on the ground and researchers have found that pushbacks have become common practice. People are largely not being permitted to apply for asylum as they cross into Poland, as narratives of the “bogus asylum seeker” have taken hold and been used to sustain an environment that ignores people's right to international protection[1]. The recent Oxfam/Egala report, [Brutal Barriers](#), even describes how pushbacks have occurred from Polish hospitals as people are treated for their injuries and then returned to Belarus.

The area surrounding this border is complex and has led to many people becoming [injured as they attempt to cross](#). Not only is it difficult terrain made up of dense forest, swamp areas and subject to extreme temperatures but it is also littered with human-made barriers such as razor-wire fences and smart walls, that are equipped with cameras and security sensors.

This, combined with the emergency Exclusion Zone measure, has failed in its attempt to deter people from crossing and instead has only created a more perilous border. As the threat of illegal pushbacks is so high, people are attempting to cross the border more rapidly to avoid detection, thus leading to more injuries.



Photo taken by Europe Must Act, Poland/Belarus 2022

Legalising Pushbacks

The latest law that has been passed will prevent people from claiming asylum at this dangerous border unless they are deemed to belong to vulnerable groups, such as minors, those who require special medical attention and pregnant women. As previously mentioned, this violates EU and International law and sets a precedent for denying the right to international protection.

Moreover, it reduces the usually in-depth and complex decision-making process of whether someone is entitled to international protection down to a momentary “vulnerability check” with the Polish border authorities, whose border admission practices have previously been found to be racialised and discriminatory [2].

Ultimately, the situation in Poland is the latest iteration of the trend across European nations to degrade asylum rights, attempt to legalise pushbacks and continue to enact a policy of deterrence through human rights abuses.

Another Iteration Of The Hostility Across Europe

The Polish/Belarusian border has begun to showcase many of the issues that we see in Europe’s toxic approach towards those seeking protection:

No Safe Routes

- It’s an example of how routes in Europe are ever-evolving, when one closes people are forced to consider new and often increasingly dangerous options.



2. Klaus, W. (2021b) 'The Porous Border Woven with Prejudices and Economic Interests. Polish Border Admission Practices in the Time of COVID-19'. Social Sciences 10(11): 435-448. 10.3390/socsci10110435

Narratives of Crisis

- The exclusion zone and the Muharrama or Sistiema (an area between the two borders created by the erection of multiple fences, where many have become trapped) have become examples of how narratives of “crisis” have reinforced the so-called need for extreme measures [3] through militarised and heavily guarded borders that are impossible to reach, where people on the move are put at risk and where EU and international law has become ignored.

Division and the New EU Pact

- Poland serves to exemplify Europe’s increasing dividedness when it comes to refugees and asylum. The interior minister recently announced that [Poland won’t be implementing the new EU migration pact](#), explaining that Poland had already provided substantial support for refugees fleeing Ukraine and, therefore, it won’t be accepting refugees from other member states or paying the financial contributions stipulated by the pact if a country refuses to accept someone. Prime Minister Donald Tusk has also indicated that [they no longer intend to comply with the Dublin Regulation](#), citing similar reasons. This appears to be aimed at preventing Germany from returning asylum seekers to Poland and also speaks to a deeper issue of the lack of cohesion when it comes to welcoming asylum seekers to Europe, instead, asylum seekers are a buck to be passed and people become a problem to be minimised.

Italy's Role in the New EU Migration Pact



Italy is actively seeking an [expedited implementation of the EU's new migration pact](#), which is currently scheduled for 2026. As part of this, Italy has pursued externalising asylum processing through the [Italy-Albania Protocol](#), signed in November 2023. This agreement aims to intercept people on the move in international waters and transfer them to Albania for asylum processing, hoping to deter irregular sea crossings and ease pressure on Italy's border. The protocol involved the construction of two reception centres in Albania, where people on the move will await asylum decisions, with those approved being relocated to Italy, and those rejected sent back to their countries of origin. However, this initiative has faced significant legal, ethical, and logistical challenges.

Italian courts and the European Court of Justice have raised concerns about the legality of transferring people to Albania, citing potential violations of international human rights laws and the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning people to unsafe conditions.

[Amnesty International](#) has labelled the agreement as "unworkable, harmful, and unlawful," highlighting risks of arbitrary detention and inadequate protection for vulnerable groups. Furthermore, [the Albanian facilities remain largely empty, prompting criticism](#) of the €1 billion investment and concerns over Albania's capacity to manage the asylum process. While Italy's strategy seeks to manage migration more effectively, it faces significant legal scrutiny and opposition from human rights organisations, which argue that the externalisation of asylum processing undermines people's rights and could have serious humanitarian implications.

Pushbacks

Vos Triton Case: Italy Found Liable for Delegated Pushback to Libya

This case study addresses the issue of illegal pushbacks in Italy, focusing on the Vos Triton case and Italy's role in facilitating a delegated pushback to Libya. On June 14, 2021, the Vos Triton, a merchant ship, rescued 170 people stranded in international waters. However, Italy's Coordination and Rescue Center (MRCC) instructed the ship to wait for the Libyan patrol boat, effectively facilitating the delegated rejection of people on the move back to Libya, a country known for severe human rights abuses.

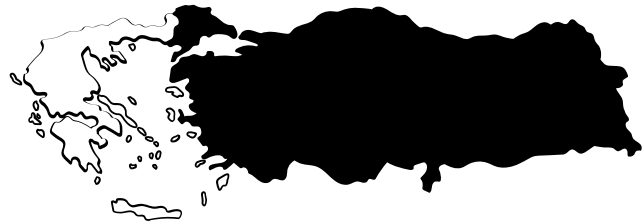
The Court of Rome ruled that Italy's actions, despite not deploying naval assets directly, made the country complicit in violating international law. In November 2024, the court condemned the support Italy provided to Libyan authorities in returning displaced people to an unsafe country, marking a significant legal victory against the delegated rejection system. This practice, where Italy, often in collaboration with private actors like merchant vessels, facilitates pushbacks, was deemed to breach both human rights and asylum law.

The case is a significant legal challenge to Italy's maritime policies, which have contributed to forcing displaced people back to Libya, where they face systemic violence. It underscores the need for reform and accountability in Italy's approach to managing migration in the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, the Vos Triton case emphasises the critical role of NGOs and activists in documenting and challenging such pushbacks. Although some victims have seen legal victories, many others remain trapped in Libya, enduring the dangers posed by traffickers and authorities. The ruling highlights the ongoing need for comprehensive reform to protect the rights and safety of asylum seekers and all people on the move.



Updates on Turkey and Greece



Migration management between Turkey and Greece remains central in European migration policies because of Greece's role as Europe's "shield"[4], Turkey's strategic position, and the historically tense diplomatic relations between the two states. As a key entry point to the EU, Greece has long been a laboratory for migration policies that prioritise the exclusion of people on the move. At the same time, Turkey's geographical position has made it an essential partner in migration control, a role strengthened by the 2016 EU-Turkey deal—the first in a series of agreements aimed at externalising border management beyond EU territory.



Image by Ignat Kushanrev sourced from [Unsplash](#)

The implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum – an umpteenth harmful EU initiative – has raised concerns about its influence on the region and the people on the move who cross that border. As highlighted by Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), the Pact will not only have an overall degrading effect on refugee protection and EU member states' asylum systems in general, but more specifically, regarding Greek border policies, it will further expose the structural unpreparedness of the Greek asylum system – an element that contradicts the implementation standards set by the Pact itself – making it even more blatant.

4. Spanou, C. (Ed.). (2021). Crisis, reform and the way forward in Greece: A turbulent decade. Routledge.

The Role of the Evros/Meriç River

The Turkish–Greek border, particularly along the Evros/Meriç River, stands as one of the most dangerous transit points for people on the move. The border control measures enforced by both countries, along with practices of forced pushbacks and deportations, have raised significant human rights concerns, as highlighted by numerous international reports.

The Evros/Meriç River acts as a natural boundary between Greece and Turkey, and has become a critical crossing point for people on the move attempting to enter the European Union. In recent years, both nations have strengthened border security measures, making the route increasingly dangerous. An investigation by [Forensic Architecture \(2024\)](#) examined evidence of pushback operations, revealing how both Greek and Turkish authorities have erected fences and advanced surveillance systems, heightening the risk of violence and human rights violations.

Pushbacks in Greece and Human Rights Violations

The practice of forced pushbacks by Greek authorities has been consistently documented by human rights organizations. In August 2023, [a joint third-party intervention by ECCHR \(European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights\), PRO ASYL, and Refugee Support Aegean](#) argued that pushbacks are not isolated but part of a broader, coordinated policy to deter migration. Their evidence revealed problematic details of Greece’s border control operations, highlighting a range of violent and unlawful actions, including the secret detention of people on the move in the Evros region, forced returns in rubber dinghies, and the use of inflatable boats to expel people into the Aegean Sea.

In 2023, Greece witnessed a sharp increase in refugee arrivals, with [48,721 people](#) reaching its shores—nearly double the number from the year before. However, this increase also came with a tragic toll: 799 people lost their lives or went missing, a significant rise from the previous year.

One particularly devastating incident was the [Pylos shipwreck](#) in June 2023, where a crowded fishing boat capsized, resulting in the deaths of about 650 people. This tragedy has intensified criticism of Greece's sea rescue operation and prompted calls for an investigation regarding the delayed response by authorities.

A.R.E. v. Greece: European Court of Human Rights confirmed unlawful system of pushbacks in Greece

In January 2025, the European Court of Human Rights made a pivotal decision, [condemning](#) Greece for its ongoing use of pushbacks. The court ruled that Greece had forcibly deported a Turkish woman in 2019, denying her the chance to apply for asylum. This practice was characterised as systematic, adding to the growing global pressure on Greece to modify its asylum policies to ensure they comply with international human rights standards.

Turkey's Role in Migration Rejections and Deportations

Turkey, hosting over 3.2 million Syrian refugees under its temporary protection regime as of 2023, along with 222,000 asylum seekers from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Ukraine, has faced significant scrutiny regarding its treatment of people on the move and refugees. Human rights organisations have documented instances where Turkish authorities have arbitrarily arrested, detained, and deported refugees to conflict zones, notably Syria and Afghanistan. Between February and July 2022, hundreds of Syrian refugee men and boys were deported back to Syria, exposing them to potential harm.

Investigations have revealed that the European Union has funnelled hundreds of millions of euros into Turkey's deportation system. These funds have been linked to the operation of detention centres where refugees, including Syrians, Afghans, and Iranians, face abuse and, in some cases, are forcibly deported to war-torn regions. Recent shifts in Turkish public sentiment have further complicated the situation. Economic challenges, including inflation and high unemployment, have fueled anti-refugee sentiments, leading to calls for the repatriation of Syrian refugees. However, refugees express fear about returning to Syria due to ongoing instability and potential danger.



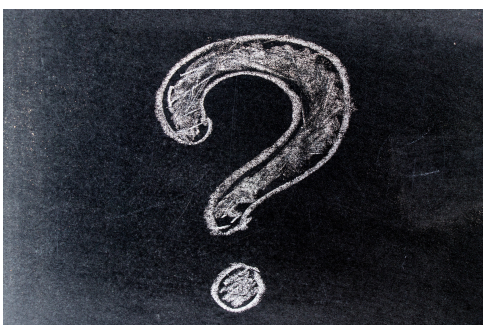
Suspended Protection for Syrian Refugees

Growing calls for the deportation of Syrian refugees in Turkey reflect a wider shift towards withdrawal of protection — a trend that is now also visible in Europe, where the recent political developments in Syria have triggered similar reactions.

At the beginning of December 2024, following a rapid military action by the armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), we witnessed the [fall of Assad's regime](#) after 13 years of civil war, which has led to 7 million people crossing international borders, most of whom have settled in neighbouring countries or within the region.

In Europe, displaced persons of Syrian origin constitute a significant group among both short- and long-term third-country residents. [Many Syrians](#) have lived in Europe for over a decade now and are integrated into the civil societies of host countries, often holding important positions in socially critical professions, such as healthcare in Germany. Many of these individuals have gained long-term resident status or even citizenship in their adopted countries.

Despite clear evidence of integration, the presence of Syrians remains a contentious political issue in several European countries. Therefore, it is not surprising that the news of Assad's fall — an event that does not necessarily signify the [end of the civil war](#) — has prompted numerous European [politicians](#) and [parliamentarians](#) to call for the repatriation of Syrian nationals currently in Europe. Additionally, several states have [suspended processing pending asylum applications](#).



This raises important questions about the safety of returning to Syria. Are Syrians living in Europe prepared or willing to return voluntarily? Can European states compel them to return?

While the military forces responsible for the takeover of Damascus have established an interim government, the situation in Syria remains unstable. A vast part of the population needs humanitarian aid to survive, and the situation has deteriorated further following the [USAID funding cuts](#).

Fights between various forces inside the country, violence towards minority groups, as well as clashes at the borders with neighbouring countries such as Israel or Lebanon, are [still going on](#).

Nevertheless, nearly 750,000 internally displaced persons have returned to their homes in [Syria](#) since November 2024, and as of January 2025, [UNHCR](#) estimates that some 250,000 Syrians have already returned from Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, while many that have gone to Syria from Europe did so temporarily to celebrate and assess the situation, intending to return to their host countries. This trend was anticipated based on previous studies. In those studies, only half of the surveyed refugees living in Germany expressed a desire to return to Syria eventually[5]. In contrast, Syrians living in countries like Turkey or Lebanon were more inclined to return home when it is deemed safe again[6].

Furthermore, European states are not in a position to withdraw international protection, in accordance with international and European law and the principle of [non-refoulement](#), as long as the situation remains volatile. [Cessation evaluations](#) should be conducted after a sufficient amount of time has passed, especially if the changes occurred violently, as is the case here.

"... change [must be] of such a profound and durable nature that it eliminates the refugee's well-founded fear of being persecuted. A profound change of circumstances is not the same as an improvement in conditions in the country of origin."[7]

5. Al Husein, N., & Wagner, N. (2023). Determinants of Intended Return Migration among Refugees: A Comparison of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey. *International Migration Review*, 57(4), 1771-1805

6. Alrababah, A., Masterson, D., Casalis, M., Hangartner, D., & Weinstein, J. (2023). The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions. *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 1108-1131

7. Commission of the European Communities, 'Proposal for a Council Directive on Minimum Standards for the Qualification and Status of Third Country Nationals and Stateless Persons as Refugees or as Persons who Otherwise Need International Protection', COM (2001) 510 final, 12 Sept. 2001, Art. 13.

According to the [EU directive 2013/32/EU](#), member states should obtain precise and up-to-date information on the situation in the origin country from sources such as [UNHCR](#) that, at the moment "continues to call on States not to forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria, including Palestinians previously residing in Syria, to any part of Syria".

As a result, Syrians living outside the country should not be compelled to return but should have the option to do so voluntarily. For example, the [Syrian Legal Development Programme \(SLDP\)](#) has drafted recommendations to highlight the potential for the international community to establish a new framework for refugee returns, emphasising the importance of security, dignity, and above all, informed consent in the repatriation process.

To [enable refugees to actively participate in the reconstruction of Syria](#) as integral members of civil society, returns should be viewed as an ongoing process. Displaced Syrians should have the opportunity to travel temporarily to their country to assess the situation and gradually rebuild their personal and financial ties while still receiving protection from the host country.

["This moment is not only an opportunity for exiled Syrians to turn the page on displacement, it is also a rare opportunity for the international community to design a new blueprint for refugee returns in an age of criminalised migration. It is also a rare opportunity, then, for cautious hope."](#)

Final Thoughts

One year after the introduction of the New EU Pact on Migration, the situation for people on the move remains dire. While the European Commission maintains that due to “past crises, with the unprecedented numbers of refugees and irregular migrants, and the deaths at sea, it became clear that the EU needs a common migration system that works in a fair and comprehensive way.” However, across Europe, restrictive policies, systemic pushbacks, and bureaucratic hurdles continue to undermine the fundamental right to seek asylum. From Poland’s suspension of asylum claims at the Belarusian border to Italy’s rising rejection rates and Greece’s continued pushbacks, the European migration landscape is increasingly shaped by deterrence rather than protection. Meanwhile, the shifting political situation in Syria has prompted renewed debates over the repatriation of Syrian refugees, despite clear evidence that return remains unsafe.

The developments we have outlined above underscore the fact that there is still an urgent need for a rights-based approach to migration policy—one that prioritises international obligations, safeguards human dignity and upholds the principles of protection and solidarity. The erosion of asylum rights and the normalisation of exclusionary practices not only violate international and EU law but also perpetuate human suffering.

As the EU continues to grapple with migration governance, policymakers must shift away from reactive, securitised approaches and instead work towards sustainable, humane solutions. Ensuring safe pathways to asylum, improving reception conditions, and holding states accountable for violations are crucial steps in addressing the ongoing crisis. Without decisive action, Europe risks further entrenching a system of exclusion that leaves countless lives in jeopardy. The anniversary of the EU Pact on Migration should serve as a moment for reflection and, more importantly, for meaningful change.



Image by Alexas_Fotos sourced from [Pixabay](#)



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***We're volunteers and asylum and migration is a complex topic. This means we try to include a variety of opinions and approaches to a topic. We do our best to research and use our expertise accurately however, we also believe it's vital to encourage healthy discussion and stop misinformation. Therefore we encourage any feedback or constructive criticism of our work.**

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Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.



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