THE Bulgarian WAY

EUROPE MUST ACT.

DISPLACEMENT, SURVIVAL AND DIGNITY BETWEEN LIMBO AND HELL

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Special thanks

Ten anonymous persons on the move gave their time and effort to put into words their experience and inside perspective.

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"He wanders homeless, sleepless, restless under a foreign appearance and a new name, with a heart grown strong and ready for the cross, carrying awareness, strength, and light to the blind slaves in the land of slavery." [1]
Ivan Vazov (1881) "Levski"

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THE PROBLEMATIC

Irregular flows of persons into and across Bulgaria are steady. Their asylum applications are systematically rejected. Deportations to Bulgaria from Central Europe are rising. The European Union is consolidating a policy of dejection, deportation and deterrence towards displaced people in need for protection from violence or in search for a better life. This policy is materialized and updated in the regulations emerging from the New European Pact on Asylum.

People arriving in Bulgaria in search for asylum or deported back to Bulgaria with pending or accepted asylum requests are often not accepted in reception camps. People staying in camps or trying to survive outside camps have limited access to food, adequate healthcare and other services. Bulgaria does not provide direct financial support to immigrants or People on the Move (POM). The combination of neglect and rejection leaves many people homeless, forced to sleep on the streets and struggling to access basic material means for survival.

People accommodated in reception centers endure extreme deprivation, including inadequate food, unsanitary conditions and virtually no access to medical care. Most people reaching Bulgaria from Turkey (through smuggling) or from Central Europe (through deportation), face detention in inhumane and degrading conditions. Mistreated like prisoners, crammed together in derelict and neglected camps or left to their own devices in irregular administrative situations, POM are part and parcel of Bulgarian society, in a country with an ongoing history of segregation, marginalizatioin and abandonment of people from different backgrounds and conditions.

This report contributes to the work of Europe Must Act to document, understand and analyze the conditions and experiences of people arriving in Europe, by primarily listening to their own accounts [2]. We reached out to informants facing the Bulgarian system for the processing of asylum applicants, relying on persons and organizations in the refugee-support social tissue. In Bulgaria, most POM are processed through the Busmantsi and Liubimets detention camps as well as the Harmanli open camp. Other camps in Sofia may host persons for months, depending on their nation of origin and legal situation.

[1] Скита се бездомен, без сън, без покой, / под вънкашност чужда и под име ново / и с сърце порасло и за кръст готово, / и носи съзнанье, крепост, светлина / на робите слепи в робската страна.

[2] See SAC and EMA (2022) A Life without Freedom Is Not a Life, and MA and SAC (2021) "All I want is to be free and leave". Life in the Closed Controlled Access Centre in Samos.

In contrast to other former projects, our access to informants in Bulgaria was limited by our own linguistic barriers (most informants for this report are Arabic speakers), the lack of a firm structure of volunteer refugee-support organizations and, in relation to these features, a general difficulty to find motivated, trusting participants. For similar reasons, the informants we did manage to access were very willing to contribute their experience, genuinely trusted us and had important observations to provide from their rich, eventful and challenging experience.

METHOD

The outreach strategy, participant engagement, interviewing and analysis developed in the research leading to this report is inspired by the tenets of Institutional Ethnography [3] (IE). People confronting a problematic can understand and describe what happens to them. Their position as targets or human tokens in an institutional environment designed to process and control them makes them privileged observers and analysts of an imposed reality that turns towards them and often against them. People's here-and-now is the original site of the problematic, and their perspective on it sets the terms to define it. But the same people may have limited access to the networks in which their activity is inserted, or knowledge of them, beyond their temporal and spatial constraints.

One purpose of social research is to carry forward the wisdom contained in the words of the people oppressed by institutions, who know the institutions from their positions as targets of institutional power. This is why IE starts with people's experience as they narrate it. But IE does not end with people's experience. It also wants to discover links between the experience of different people, across different contexts and conditions, along complex, distributed networks. Research takes the opportunity to survey variety and make sense of wider networks, organizations and discourses traversed by the same institutional processes across time and space.

[3] See DeVault and McCoy, (2006) Institutional ethnography: Using interviews to investigate ruling relations. Pp. 15-44 in Institutional Ethnography as Practice , edited by D. E. Smith, Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield; and Smith, (2012) Institutional ethnography. Pp. 409-416 in Handbook of Feminist Research, edited by S. N. Hesse-Biber, London: Sage.

A problematic is a system of discourses, institutions and preoccupations that traverses the lived experiences of specific people. By listening to POM, we aim to define the problematic of surviving through the European border regime in Bulgaria in terms of the problems experienced and described by them. The accounts of lived experience generated in interviews refer to forms of social organization, social relations and recurrent meaningful action that compose the regime we aim to describe and understand. We listen not only to their experience, but also to their insights about how this experience is produced within an institutional network; further, we describe this network in terms of connections between their local experience and the local experience of other POM and other actors.

We collected and audio-recorded ten in-depth interviews with POM, with simultaneous interpretation to English:

- 9 interviews were done in Arabic, 1 in French
- 1 participant was aged 18; 6 participants were aged 23-28; 1 participant was aged 38; 2 participants were aged 45-46
- 8 participants were of Syrian (including Kurdish) origin, 1 was from Algeria, 1 was from Morocco
- 8 participants were men, 2 were women

Interviewees were reminded they could interrupt the recording at any time (to exclude part of their accounts from the record for confidentiality reasons), and some did on occasion. We transcribed verbatim all English content in the interviews.

All personal information shared in the interviews is treated confidentially, kept safe, and only used for the stated purposes of the research. Transcripts and other written outputs do not include any personal data. We use pseudonyms or conceal names of persons, organizations and locations to protect participant identities.

Fragments of transcript reproduced in this report for illustration and analysis are cleared of personal information, while indicating the sex, age and nationality of informants, and the time they were interviewed. The original expression of participants (as reflected in live interpretation) is preserved for the analytical insight it adds to understanding the problematic. In the reproduced fragments we may omit irrelevant contributions from interviewers or interpreters.

Through the remains of this report, we describe and discuss, on the basis of the narratives built by our informants, the process of rejection, reception and detention on arrival to Bulgaria; life and treatment in the Bustmantsi Detention Centre and in the Harmanli open camp; practices of interrogation, mostly performed at the Liubimets Detention Centre, which formally lead to poor asylum applications; the material conditions and fundamental supplies in detention centres and camps; and some instances of neglect and mistreatment surrounding healthcare and medical attention. We conclude the report with some analytical observations on the maintainance of a system of control, humiliation and degradation of persons in need for refuge, and offering a series of recommendations.

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FROM THE BORDER:
PUSHBACKS OR RESIDENTIAL DETENTION

Some respondents describe the process of being handled, managed and transported by smugglers into and across Bulgaria as being treated like objects or like flocks of animals:

"We were about 25 people. And then before the borders, we had to cross something like a river but it's not sure if it's river or it's empty, and the only way to cross it is to pass a man-made bridge, like with just some wooden sticks, which is very very thin, then we have to cross it with balance and really being careful, and also going fast. And there are many like old people, like old women who are with us. And then maybe it can break. Something can happen. And afterwards, what I was experiencing is that the guy who is the smuggler who was helping in order to move, he was giving instructions on how like to move fast, to move slow, to do this, to do that. And he was not so much in his conscious state, because it seems like he is high or something.

In order to stay awake. And then he would threaten or he would insult. He would not be in his good behaviours with people. And it would affect me. Like he would insult if someone is not walking fast. Or stuff like that."
(...)

"So on top of this trench, a lot of old women fall. And suddenly this wood breaks and they fall on the ground. It was night. And we were very scared. The smuggler had to take something. So he could stay awake. He was pronouncing insults, threats of beating, threatening us to stay still. And they will leave if you don' trun in the minute they tell you to run. Even if you don't have the strength to run."
25-year-old Syrian woman, interviewed April 2025

Reiterated beating constitutes torture and is practiced as a way of keeping detained persons in a state of permanent fear, obtaining their passivity. On the other hand, the practice of beating persons as a direct response to their human initiatives (e.g., when somebody asks for water or tries to hide an object) is characteristically de-humanizing. Rather than treating people as objects, state agents are treating them as animals to be disciplined and restrained.

The following testimony describes an instance of deliberate mistreatment, torture and degradation through a detention ritual, involving an aggression with dogs. The use of dogs in the process of detention, instant torture and pushback is both arbitrary and calculated. On this occasion, a dog bites a POM running away from border police; once the group is detained, the injured person is not assisted, which involves the persistence and deterioration of the wound; finally, members of the police stage a humiliation ceremony in which one of their dogs (recently used to attack the POMs) gets better treatment than the POMs they are detaining:

"They took our stuff and put us in a line of 40 people. They took all of our things and they took us, and for the guy who got bitten, they didn't disinfect it, they didn't do anything about it. And they gave water to the dog in front of us."
45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

Typically it is men that get beaten up; women report witnessing men getting beaten up, while they themselves are saved from this treatment.

"The police who arrested us had very terrible treatment. And I didn't get beaten up, luckily. But a lot of people and a lot of guys got beaten up. And part of our group ran away and then they got captured. Our captors were wearing a green mask. And they were beating up even the guys they arrested in the woods after they ran away."
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interviewed August 2025

Border pushbacks from Bulgaria to Turkey are normally followed by a next attempt. Agreements with smugglers are paid as a whole service which is completed with successful transit into the country; so a pushback naturally leads to a next attempt at crossing.

Every occasion of detention of Persons on the Move in Bulgarian areas near the border involves police taking away from them their phones, food, water, money and other belongings. Apart from institutional theft, this constitutes mistreatment by deprivation and may involve serious risks for the health and physical integrity of the victims. It has to be taken into account that POMs often cross the border and move across the country on foot, under whatever inclement conditions the weather offers, day and night:

"Half of the group was caught, and half continued. I was with the group that was caught. The police took our phones and the food and water. And then they put us back in the Turkish land. We stayed 5 days without food. Until another group came and they brought food with them."
45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

Upon detention, people are ordered to give in their mobile phones with their passcodes open. The police will use the mobile phones to obtain information about the process of smuggling and use it to incriminate persons. Apart from the theft of a personal belonging which is fundamental for the survival of POMs, this investigative strategy constitutes a breach of the right to privacy.

"They caught us. Because they have dogs and the dog bit one of us. This is in Bulgaria. And they caught the whole group because of the guy who got bitten. Everyone who had a phone from the Syrian group had to open their phones, put the code and put it aside. They wanted to take them open. They took 25 phones all new, and they took 16,000 Turkish Lira, and 800 Euros."
45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed
May 2025

POMs detained by either National Police or Border Police, if not pushed back across the border, will typically be taken to the closest Police Department, where they will be held in detention until they are transferred to the Busmantsi detention centre. If the person is transported to Busmantsi, the goods police take away from them may actually be confiscated provisionally. This systematic procedure works as a tacit blackmailing system to prevent people from escaping detention. People are deprived of their goods for the time they are in detention, including police headquarters and Busmantsi detention centre, and they can get them back once they leave Busmantsi.

"At the police station, everything was taken away from us, including money, mobile phones and documents. Until we arrived in Busmantsi, we could not get it back."
25-year-old Syrian man, interviewed
May 2025

While being detained, held in detention and transported, people are handled and moved like objects, never being informed of where they are going or what the justification or purpose of the enforcement is.

"They took all of us without telling us where we were going. The trip by car took two hours. They took all our clothes off and threw our clothes away."
25-year-old Syrian man, interviewed
May 2025

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BUSMANTSI DETENTION CENTRE

The practice of reiterated abuse and aggression continues in the Busmantsi Detention Centre, under the constraints of a prison environment:

"The treatment in Busmantsi was obviously horrible. There was abuse at the hands of the police. Whenever you spoke you would be physically assaulted, hit. We were in lockdown from 10 o'clock in the evening until 6 in the morning. [For this period,] we were locked into our cell rooms, units. We weren't even allowed to use the toilet."
Syrian man in his 20s, interviewed August 2025

The following testimonies reflect the common observation that any communicative act addressed to a guard in the camp can become a pretext for aggression. This practice work to keep a symbolic barrier between uniformed staff and POMs. Residents soon learn that the staff is not only unapproachable, but also hostile and aggressive:

"In the detention centre, the first day we went to Sofia, they beat me and my friend. We were thirsty, and we wanted to take a bottle of water. And they had like bottles of water on the side. So we were asking for it. And because we asked for it, they just started beating us. And we were trying to hide our phones and then one of the guys came and beat us."
23-year-old Syrian man, interview held in April 2025

"I wanted to go get a drink from the machine. I told them "I just want to get a drink from the machine". They took me to a room with no cameras and beat me up."
25-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

The fact that the victim is taken to a room without cameras indicates a strategic practice, both to aggress immates and to make sure the aggressions cannot be documented, normalizing impunity. The normalization of aggression and violence is also achieved through a reiterated atttitude:

"The treatment in the closed camp was really terrible, we can't ask anything, they keep screaming at us for everything. I never witnessed any beatings in the camp, but there were guys, on the other side of the same building, I don't know about them, mainly it was basically a lot of screaming, a lot of telling them to shut up, and a lot of them not wanting to speak to them."
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interviewed August 2025



A bedroom in the Busmantsi detention centre

Busmantsi is referred to by POMs as a prison. Indeed, it is designed with the structural properties of prisons and the practices in it suggest it is used with the institutional purpose of restricting the freedom of its residents, punishing them (for no specific misdeed), and damaging them. The normalized use of aggression seems to be aimed at regulating the behaviour of inmates:

"It's like a prison. All the guards are police. And if someone makes a problem, they will beat him. If someone doesn't make a problem, they don't beat him."
23-year-old Syrian man, interviewed April 2025

For example, if there is a fight between inmates (relatively common between people from different lands of origin in overcrowded environments), the police will 'punish' one of the opponents; a system aimed also at deterring others from 'causing trouble':

"Because of the problem between the Moroccan man and the Uzbek man, the police beat him. The police beat the Moroccan because of this problem. There was a conflict between the Moroccan and the Uzbekistan man, and then the police started beating the Moroccan."
23-year-old Syrian man, interviewed April 2025

Or detainees get beaten up if they try to go to a different section of the facility (where they are not allowed) to get food:

"The police don't talk to us. But for the Afghani and Moroccans who are on the top floor, they beat them up when they go down to get food. Because there are different sections. So it's like they break a rule. They break a rule and then they get beaten up. By the police. They are part of the Migration section."
18-year-old Moroccan man, interviewed April 2025

Yet the relatively common aggression following any kind of initiative by inmates (mentioned by different respondents) suggests an institutional function of causing them physical and psychological harm generically, such that the detention time (normally extended to the currently maximum period of 18 months) will itself work as a punishment on the person.

It is generally known that the beatings, humiliation and application of a maximum period of detention are used as a way to manipulate people into signing papers for voluntary return. This is one of the purposes of mistreatment - to presssure asylum applicants to opt out of their right to wait until the end of the detention period and be released.

As mentioned above, mobile phones and other personal belongings are confiscated upon entering the facility and given back when the person leaves. Or, if the person is sent to a next facility, they will get their belongings at the facility. This procedure is used as a guarantee that the person will not abscond from the institutional treatment imposed on them:

"They take your stuff but they don't give it to you unless you arrive here to the open camp. It stays there. So they are like taking your stuff from one place to another and keeping them."
23-year-old Syrian man, interviewed April 2025

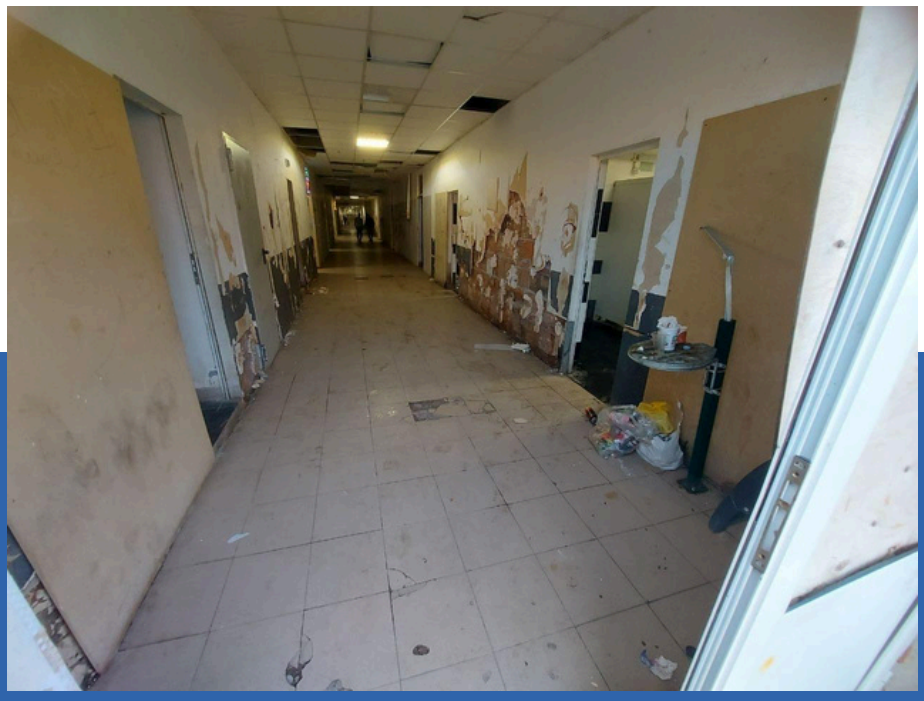
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HARMANLI OPEN CAMP

The Harmanli open camp is the most common first destination for asylum applicants while waiting for a reply to their first application, if they are not held in the Busmantsi detention centre. As in the Busmantsi detention camp, police violence is a primary method for keeping control of residents In the Harmanli open camp, especially in the men's section. Police regularly scream at men or physically assault them. Physical violence is reportedly used to 'pacify' or 'punish' people who take part in fights:

"There's police everywhere in the camp. And there's constant physical assault. For example, if there is an argument between two of the asylum seekers, the immates, the police would come and just basically assault every person who comes up, disregarding whether there's any reason to do that or not. They would usually use the batons, so it was, let's say, quite a heavy assault, physical assault. And one person actually lost his eye because of being struck with a baton. People do complain, but you're complaining to the police about the police. So if you have to file a complaint about the police to the administration, actually the mistreatment is coming from the administration, so..."

Syrian man in his 20s, interviewed August 2025



A corridor in the Harmanli open camp

Police intimidation operates as a system of external coercion. But residents in the Harmanli camp live also under the informal control of smugglers, who have access to private spaces of everyday life. Young women on their own may be manipulated into an alliance with a smuggler where they will be coerced to provide intimacy or collaboration with smugglers in exchange for protection and money:

"Single girls by themselves, they were surrendering to the situation. And they take like support from the guys who were on the street. Financial support. So it's like she gives benefit of being his lover or closest intimate maybe to the smuggler. And then the smuggler will give money to the girls who are in the camp. And then also she is helping, supporting the smugglers. Some of the girls are supporting the smugglers to hide people in their room in order to be able to continue to another country."

(...)

"One of the reasons that the girls don't go to the police to talk about the insecurity that they feel, is that they are afraid of the guys, especially the smugglers, who would threaten them and who would put them in a condition where they don't have privacy. They would invade their privacy, and that's why they feel like afraid. Even men become afraid from smugglers."

25-year-old Syrian woman, interview held in August 2025

Smugglers thus keep residents in the camp, and particularly vulnerable women, in a situation of oppression and freezing fear that makes them more vulnerable, isolating them and effectively preventing them from reaching out for help, in a context where no public entity or independent organization is available to support them or protect them. Smugglers seem to be part of a pervasive informal power facilitated by institutional anomie:

"[These girls and women] don't know how to get what they want. And then they get to the smuggler, like they ask for the help of the smugglers. And they are also manipulated at the same time. And there is no procedure that they understand. So the only way that they can process and understand is to obey and to do what the smugglers ask for. And then by this way they are afraid also that they will lose something, by not obeying to what they say."

25-year-old Syrian woman, interview held in August 2025

In the Summer of 2024 there was a protest in the Harmanli camp to demand that asylum applications be managed swiftly. As way of repression, police started to arrive at the entrance of the camp. Then when someone tried to make a gathering, or when a known protester turned up, police would beat them with batons:

"People tried to continue the protest for three days, protesting. We stayed for three days. We wanted to stay more. But the thing that happened is that the police in the morning were coming and staying in front of the camp. And when someone goes out, and they try to make like a group, gathering, they beat them with the stick. There is one person which they know his face. And then when he went outside, they started beating him.
Now people are afraid to make gatherings.
There is one Algerian translator, who has given names of seven people.
They took aside those people and then they beat them up.
And they made them sign on papers that will disrupt their applications.
They closed their applications. They were forced to leave.
They left.
They gave them a chance to go to Busmantsi for one year and eight months, or else they escape.
They are skilled at the art of humiliating.
They have many ways of doing it."
46-year-old Syrian man, interviewed April 2025

This fragment describes a series of corrupt repression strategies, on top of the direct attack on persons exercising their right to protest by beating them up. One strategy involves the collaboration of interpreters [4] to report on who was involved in a protest.

A second strategy consists of coercing persons to sign documents that will effectively cancel or interrupt their asylum application. A third strategy consists of offering asylum applicants to choose between the alternatives of being detained in Busmantsi for eighteen months, or becoming irregular.

This last strategy constitutes an arbitrary rejection of the right of asylum, as punishment for precisely demanding that international law and due process be followed. At the same time, it involves incorporating the victim of repression in the process, by making them choose between two irregular procedures, both of which deny their basic rights to citizenship, to freedom and to asylum. Above all, the repressive strategies depicted in this account attest to a system of impunity: On occasion of an attempt to obtain justice by asylum applicants, their immediate institutional environment is actively manipulated to damage their rights and to prevent any possible legal response.
Respondents describe the relation between residents in the Harmanli camp and local citizens of Harmanli as one of parallel coexistence, with hardly any contact between the two communities. Some refer to the local Bulgarian population reacting with hostility to camp residents, excluding them from spaces or avoiding contact:

[4] In a section below we will describe other forms of instrumentalisation of interpreters.

"[In Harmanli city] The store owners had so much racism. They don't reply. They don't talk to you. I think they have language barriers."
25-year-old Syrian woman, interview held in August 2025

But the organization of the camp also contributes to segregate asylum applicants from Bulgarian local life. On national and religious holidays, the camp is closed or only open for a short time in the morning; police patrol the city to send camp residents back to the camp:

"They were celebrating Bulgarian Independence Day. For 3 days. Or the formation of Bulgaria. Liberation. So for 3 days we cannot go out. Only 2 hours in the morning to go out. And then like police cars, they are searching if there are any Syrians to get them back.

Back to the camp. During this time.
I don't find the key reason.
It's like racism, you know. "You cannot know our culture." I suppose in order not to have any conflict between these gatherings and us. What are we, prisoners? You know, because it looks like a prisoner.
As if a refugee is a criminal and a prisoner, you know."
45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

The forced reclusion of asylum applicants into their residential facility on the occasion of national (Bulgarian) and religious (Christian) celebrations not only constitutes institutional discrimination and arbitrary privation of freedom; it also contradicts the horizon of inclusion, intercultural relations and participation which should guide policies and services in any democratic society, as proclaimed in the foundational tenets of the European Union.

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APPLYING FOR ASYLUM?
INTERROGATION

Different respondents describe how they were interrogated by administrative personnel shortly after being detained, mostly in the Liubimets or Busmantsi detention centres. These accounts suggest a systematic interrogation procedure designed with a double purpose: To run asylum applications in a way that will make them unsuccessful, and to build evidence to prosecute smugglers. Effectively, such a procedure systematically neglects the process for asylum application and betrays the right to asylum. The interrogation is geared to the institutional purpose of criminalizing persons for smuggling or person trafficking. It practically leads to the POM signing a document in Bulgarian language which is processed as an asylum application. Through the interrogations, respondents do not know the purpose of the interview, its use or even who is asking.

A POM does not choose when or how they can apply for asylum. Many reports of border violence across the Balkans and particularly at the Bulgarian borders [5] detail how POMs' explicit requests for asylum to the police are ignored, mocked, or responded with direct violence. Some of our respondents described how other administrative agents would also ignore their requests in this sense:

"First I went to the camp to request asylum, but the camp didn't do anything. They just called the police. The police came, captured us. They were interrogating us. "How did you come here? Why did you come here?" Etc. Afterwards, they took us to Busmantsi. The suffering started in Busmantsi."
Syrian man in his 20s, interviewed in August 2025

In this example, a request for asylum leads to camp staff calling the police. The police interrogation replaces an asylum interview. Such interrogtion may lead to a formal asylum application, but it is produced as a police investigation aimed at building a case of criminal behaviour. In this case, interrogations continued in the Busmantsi detention centre:

[5] See the rich collections of testimonies available in the pages of the Border Violence Monitoring Network and the Bloody Borders project.

"In our time that we spent in Busmantsi, the 9 days, we had 3 interviews. And in those interviews, we had interrogations. And in those interrogations, we always had a translator. But in terms of personal communication, you couldn't really talk to any of the staff or guards because they would just assault you. So there wasn't any translation."
Syrian man in his 20s, interviewed in August 2025

Effectively, interpreters are only available for interrogation, no other form of communication or interaction is allowed with staff or guards (exception made of getting assaulted by them) and interrogations are manipulated for the purpose of building criminal cases against smuggling, rather than providing an effective opportunity to pursue asylum.

These interrogations often happen in the Liubimets detention centre, the first accommodation facility met by many POM after arriving in Bulgaria. In the following account, the respondent suggests he provided the information demanded in interrogation under threat of imprisonment if he didn't collaborate:

"They were investigating with me. They said "you are only a person who observed or like a witness. So we just want to know from you details about the smuggler" And then I gave the number and I gave details. Because if I lie or I do anything, I will stay two to five years in jail. So I was quite aware that I need to be supporting this way."
18-year-old Moroccan man, interview held in April 2025

Interpreters play a key role in these interrogations. More than translating, interpreters design themselves the questions, challenges and accusations they formulate to POMs. In this way, NGOs mandated to support asylum applicants are instead providing the police with interrogators for criminal investigation:

"They investigated me through the Red Cross. Because there is one girl who speaks Arabic with the Red Cross.
She is working with them. And when they did like an interview with me, she was asking me "how do you know this organization that took you? Give us the number of the organization". And I had deleted the number of the organization, and then there is this friend of mine who I just talks to, to just chat and call, and she was checking this guy and taking his phone to check.
It was investigation.
And she was treating me badly like I was like on a chair, and she would tell me "oh go stand up and you don't even need a surgery". Because of my back I was really suffering, and she was treating me in a bad way"
18-year-old Moroccan man, interviewed April 2025

Not only interpreters play the role of police investigators; they also do it in ways that betray both the fundamental dignity of their interviewees and basic professional principles for valid interviewing and impartial interrogation.

The following example showcases an interpreter challenging a POM by reference to very specific information. The interpreter's behaviour displays a personal involvement and interest to not support the person's right to asylum:

"There is a translator from Aleppo, let's say, and then this translator is married to a Bulgarian. Has a Bulgarian nationality. And then would say to me that "there is nothing unsafe about Aleppo [6] , I was in Aleppo a few days ago. So why are you saying it's unsafe?" And then translators would continue to say that "you are criminals, coming to this country, You are ruining this country." And this is the kind of treatment that we are getting from translators. It could be that the translator has hate for the country itself. And has hate for EU."

45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

This specific instance suggests three worrying features of the interrogation of detainees: (1) interpreters are acting as interrogators; (2) interpreters have a biased position against the right of the respondent to asylum, based on their personal and political connection to the land where the POM was exiled from; (3) instead of designing interviews to examine a request for asylum, interrogations become humiliating and offensive exchanges where interpreters confront POMs and accuse them of crimes. This behaviour is a central component of a practice where asylum interviews are replaced by interrogations aimed at incriminating the potential applicant, leading to the formal presentation of an asylum application designed for failure. The same respondent summarises the purpose and functions of these interrogations thus:

"Like they are using the interpreter to change the opinion of the person. (...) To lie to the person. „You don't have anything. You don't deserve to be here and you are a criminal. You entered a country where you don't have a right."

45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

[6] As we complete this report, a series of military clashes have left 30 dead and forced the displacement of more than 150,000 citizens out of Aleppo in a few days.

Interpreters seem to be tasked to incriminate and verbally humiliate POMs through interrogation practices. Interrogations take the place of asylum interviews, leading to the POM signing a document in Bulgarian which counts officially as an asylum application. In this way, POMs are manipulated into presenting 'applications for asylum' without knowing it, without legal support or guidance, and without the opportunity to properly present their case in front of Bulgarian authorities.

On the other hand, in a residential context where, as we have described above, most personnel ignore the residents, and guards may also physically or verbally attack them, interpreters do communicate with them outside and beyond interrogation. Yet, our respondents refer to these exchanges with interpreters as often involving explicit and arbitrary animosity.

MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND CAMP INFRASTRUCTURES

Across open and closed camps in Bulgaria, residents describe the premises as derelict, uncared-for and faulty at different levels.

In detention centres (Busmantsi, Liubimets) immates are locked in their rooms during the night. The rooms include bunk beds and sinks. Depending on what section you are in, you may be hosted in a big bedroom (40-45 people) or in a smaller bedroom for 2-4 people. In Busmantsi, a section includes eight toilets and showers, which are not available during the night. They open from 7 to 8 in the morning. It is difficult to get hot water in showers.

The Liubimets detention camp accommodates around 500 people. Sometimes there were no beds for some people, who were then forced to sleep on the floor. Residents are allowed to walk out in the courtyard for a while every day. They can access toilets or showers for a limited period in the morning and again in the evening. There are two showers for each section accommodating 50-60 residents.

The Harmanli open camp is the most common destination for asylum applicants in Bulgaria in the first instance, once they have been registered and fingerprinted. Almost every POM in Bulgaria has some experience in it. Our respondents described its premises and their experience in them with overt disgust.

"When I entered to the camp, I was very shocked. I said, it's better that they take me back to the closed one. (...)
It's very disgusting. (...) There are big rooms, small rooms. In general, it's-
They put me in a room where there is no space. There are many people, there is no space. One of my friends told me "there is a space in our room", and he took me there. To their room."
46-year-old Syrian man, interviewed April 2025

"The conditions were horrible. There was no place to sleep, no space."
Syrian man in his twenties, interviewed August 2025

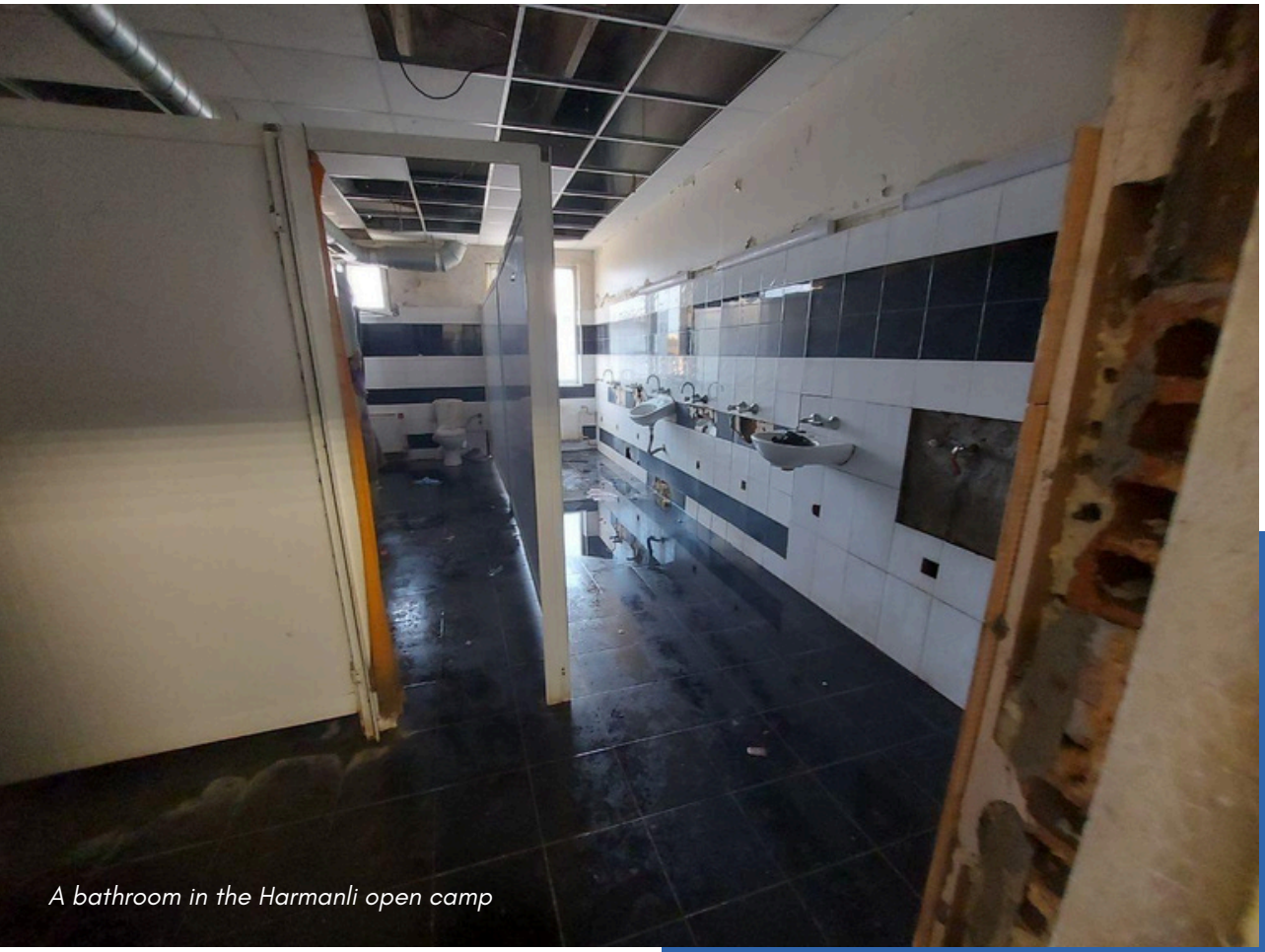

A bedroom in the Busmantsi detention centre

The Harmanli camp gets more or less crowded at different times, depending on government decisions with respect to migration flows. Some of our respondents talked about former periods when the camp was very crowded, through the year 2024 and early months of 2025; those living in the camp in the interviewing period (Spring / Summer 2025) described Harmanli as half empty.

New arrivals to the camp are normally in groups of 10-15 people, coming from detention centres. There is a section for families and single women, one for minors and one for single men. People are also separated across different nationalities, the Syrian constituting the bigger group. Smaller groups are put together separately, including people of Afghan, Egyptian, Turkish, Moroccan and Algerian origin. Those from nations with smaller numbers are accommodated in a section with caravans (containers).

Bedrooms in the men's section are of various sizes, accommodating between 6 and 50 people in bunk beds. They are crowded at times. Some men report having to sleep for several days in the courtyard until they found space in a room. Another respondent speaks about 12 men in a room for 8 people. In times when the section is crowded, people have to share a bed or sleep on the floor. In other times, the section is half empty. In the families and women's sections, the rooms accommodate three or four people.

Toilets in the men's section are broken down or destroyed. Bathrooms have no doors – the doors used to be made of aluminum, which makes them very fragile. People put up blankets to replace the doors for privacy. If a tap stops working, the camp organization will mend it provisionally, rather than replace it. At some point, the situation of abandonment and gradual destruction of the men's bathrooms forced to close down the men's bathrooms and make men use the women's bathrooms, with the subsequent impact on privacy for women who had to wash themselves in a shared bathroom with no separate space for privacy.



A bathroom in the Harmanli open camp

Some respondents mention it is not always possible to get hot water for showers. They claim the camp provides three liters of hot water per floor and per day, which does not suffice for everybody. Other respondents claim there is warm water 24 hours a day. Access to hot water depends on how crowded the camp is at a given time.

Appliances in bathrooms keep getting broken and do not get fixed. There is no maintenance of the camp premises, but gradual deterioration through the years. There were reported instances of children from the un-accompanied minors area entering the men's area and causing damage on the premises (breaking glass and ceilings). An EU Committee later came to inspect the camp and the damages were blamed on the resident men. In any case, the Committee only got the chance to visit the sections of the camp in a better condition (those for families and for un-accompanied minors):

"The EU committee came to the- to the camp, and they didn't allow anyone to talk to them, (.) and they showed them only the families and the minors, and they- they didn't show them the other section which is completely destroyed."
45-year-old Syrian man, interviewed May 2025

Among the three open camps in Sofia (Voenna Rampa, Ovcha Kupel and Vrazhdebna) only Vrazhdebna was described by some of our respondents. In this camp for only men, rooms accommodate between 4 and 8 people. The majority are Syrian, and other residents come from other Middle East countries. The central heating is not good enough for the extreme cold in the winter, so people bring their own heaters, but they are not allowed and the camp authorities take them away. A similar situation applies to fans in the Summer. Cooking is also not allowed, so if people sneak in their own stoves they get taken away. About 100 people share two toilets and two showers, having to wait in queue. Hot water is occasional, without a fixed schedule. Employees (identified by respondents as "managers and translators") tour around the Vrazhdebna camp switching off lights and telling people off for turning the light on.

EUROPE MUST ACT.

HYGIENE IN DETENTION CENTRES AND OPEN CAMPS

All respondents complain about the lack of hygiene in all detention facilities and camps. Dirt accumulates due to limitations in cleaning services and lack of replacement. For example, mattresses are re-used by different residents, becoming a source of infection.

"The cleanliness, uuuh the cleanliness and the hygiene is terrible"
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025

In open camps, cleaning staff is hired only for the office areas and main entrances. Keeping the rooms clean is responsibility of the residents:

"The conditions in the camp are not great at all. In terms of even the hygiene, he says that they're not even provided anything to clean with. They're only provided with any chemicals to clean the corridors, but not personally their rooms. So they have to buy their own chemicals to clean up."
25-year-old Syrian man, interview held August 2025

In open camps, residents are also in charge of keeping toilets and common spaces clean, taking turns assigned by the camp manager. Detention centres are generally cleaner than open camps, and Liubimets is considered cleaner than Busmantsi. In Harmanli, the women's section is considered cleaner than the men's section. This is partly related to the damage and deterioration of toilet's in the men's section we described above. Also, the women organize to make sure their rooms are clean and their toilets are cleaned by employees daily, except for weekends, when residents clean them.

The most common theme concerning the material conditions in Bulgarian camps is the infestation of bugs in mattresses, blankets and other fundamental items, and insect plagues generally:

"It was full of insects. They couldn't sleep."
Syrian man in his twenties, interview held August 2025

"It's full of like these very small, you know, insects."
18-year-old Moroccan man, interview held April 2025

" [in Busmantsi] there is always this uh bug which is very- (...) Bed bugs, yeah. In all the clothes, It sticks to you. It's in the closed camp, It's like a- (...)Yeah. Like a plague. It's all over. Also in the open camp.
46-year-old Syrian man, interview held April 2025

"Besides, I don't know exactly, but it's the- the situation where you are all the time itching.
(...)
RS: Scabies. Yes,
(...) It's happening a lot in the camp."
25-year-old Syrian woman, interview held April 2025

"The rooms are a storage for cockroaches.
(...)
And as if it's like raining cockroaches.
Small ones."
25-year-old Syrian woman, interview held April 2025

"The small insects that we spoke about.
(...)
Yeah, there's a lot, he is saying.
It's- It's very dirty, and in general, all the camps that I saw are worse than each other. Because they all have bad conditions."
23-year-old Syrian man, interview held April 2025

"It's really dirty, there is a lot of insects, there is a lot of, how do you call them?
(...) Yes, bedbugs, uuh there are- that's in general and that's most commonly in the male section of the camp, and with the guys.
(...)
Yes. Uh And then she said that the doors and the windows are broken, and if- any insects, any animals can easily enter. She said even a cat one time entered and that she's really scared about the possibility of snakes coming in, of rats coming in."
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025

Respondents also report lack of collaboration from camp administration to fight the infestation and restore hygiene:

"(...) mostly because of the- or at least partly because of the conditions, he says there's obviously- that's a cockroach infestation. There's a bed bug infestation.
And he actually had hundreds of bed bugs in his mattress. And he requested [...] the administration that they change it. And they refused and they actually said they have to take it out, clean it and take it back. Even though they have warehouses full of new mattresses, they just don't want to."
25-year-old Syrian man, interview held August 2025

This informant reports residents having to confront the infestation through their own means:

"And he said that they have to buy any chemicals to deal with the infestations themselves. And they do it periodically, but it's not a lasting solution. So, basically, you can spray it, it'll go away for a while and then it'l come back."
25-year-old Syrian man, interview held August 2025

Residents may 'achieve' being hosted in separate accommodation, with more hygienic conditions, on the grounds of illness:

"So, he's saying that when he actually went to the open camp afterwards, after the operation, the conditions were not great because, obviously, he was freshly operated on. There wasn't any privacy, any space for him. The conditions in terms of hygiene were not great, so he contacted an organization to assist him to get what he refers to as "caravans". So, I guess there's quarantine facilities that are separate from the main building."

Syrian man in his twenties, interview held August 2025

"So there is no quarantine, or at least no procedure, but he says that there is a person who has cancer, so he has separate accommodation, but that's not a case of any viral case. It's not about avoiding contagion."

25-year-old Syrian man, interview held August 2025

One respondent compared the hygiene in Bulgarian camps to that of those in Serbia:

"Yeah, this is in Serbia. (…) the camps were definitely cleaner. She said that they have every 1 or 2 days a house cleaning, like room cleaning, They change your sheets, they change your clothes to clean them. Uuuh They clean the camp every day, They clean the toilets every day"

28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025

EUROPE MUST ACT.

ACCESS TO FOOD AND DRINKING WATER

While crossing Bulgaria in hiding, POMs spend days in the mountains, carrying their own food. A standard system mentioned by some respondents is carrying a backpack with water and food for 10 days. But sometimes they have to get rid off food to reduce luggage, being left with just some food in their pockets. Other respondents describe having to survive on wild fruits (like the tamarind), without drinking water for periods between 2 and 21 days. Some are lucky to obtain provisions from international organizations supporting POMs.

On occasions of pushbacks near the border, as we have mentioned above, the police takes away all the belongings from the POM and force the person back to Turkey. This means staying for a number of days without food, until the person can meet another smuggling group.

In both open camps and detention centres, meals are provided to residents three times a day. Generally speaking, food is considered better in open camps than in detention centres, and between these, better in Liubimets than in Busmantsi. In all facilities, the cooked food provided is described as inedible and it is not officially allowed to have or use cooking devices.

These are the terms used by respondents to describe the meals provided in open camps:

"The food was inedible"
Syrian man in his twenties, interview held August 2025

"The food is terrible"
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025

"For the food, they tell you, this is the food. If you like, you like. If you don't like, it's your thing."
23-year-old Syrian man, interview held April 2025

"There's no food to eat. They give, but [we] don't eat. So, they do provide food, but the food is generally not edible. (...) even the cooking staff asked them, "do you actually eat the food?" Because even the cooking staff don't eat the food that they're cooking, and the local staff, the Bulgarian staff, bring their own food, so they never actually eat it while the cook is provided in the facility."
25-year-old Syrian man, interview held August 2025

This latest fragment is remarkable in that it denotes the awareness of the problem by the staff directly involved in its generation.

Meals are provided to people listed as residents in open camps. A standard menu is provided at fixed times in separate shifts for families, single men and different sections of camps (normally distributed across nationalities). Informants report a great difficulty to obtain a medical report to justify a different menu for medical reasons. These menus are provided in unhygienic packaging (carton boxes) that generate an unpleasant smell. Different respondents describe the portions as small. Still, some residents manage to save part of the portions to eat them later, thus saving money in food.
One respondent describes a strategy by camp authorities to conceal the precarity of food services in front of a media agency visiting the Harmanli camp, similar to the strategy described above to conceal the derelict state of infrastructures when an international agency came to visit:

"In normal days, people come out of uuh- After they get their food, they come out of the door, and they look at the food, they smell it, and if it's terrible, they just throw it away right there at the front of the door.
(...)
And she said that during the time that the cameras came, they brought them better and cleaner food, but she said they basically brought them like packaged yogurt, because then they would not throw it away. And [residents] didn't know initially that there were people, like cameras that are coming to photograph, otherwise everyone would have gone around and exposed the food, of how terrible it is.
But basically, the- only the days that the cameras were arriving, they brought them better food, which was basically packaged yogurt, instead of cooking.
(...)
So nobody would throw it away.
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025

As a consequence of the bad quality of the meals provided, people cook food they buy with economic support from their family. Some international organizations provide basic products (oil, sugar, rice, flour) to families.

In closed camps (Liubimets, Busmantsi), the quality of the food is described as similarly bad:

"The- food was very bad, that even animals cannot eat it"
18-year-old Moroccan man, interview held April 2025

"We are forced to eat it, but otherwise you will never eat that."
38-year-old Algerian man, interview held August 2025

"Really terrible treatment and very terrible food,"
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interview held August 2025



A meal portion at the Busmantsi detention centre

The kitchen serves meals three times a day (breakfast, lunch and dinner) to the residents in one room, then close for five minutes, then serve a next room. Residents are given a break of 35 minutes to eat. The portions in detention centres are similarly small and insufficient to those in open camps.

There have been instances of severe food poisoning in Busmantsi. One informant suggests medical services must know this because they seem to take for granted the source of intoxication whenever they deal with a case:

"He said that he doesn't think that they did uh all the necessary to understand what was his sickness, but he says that, in his opinion, they already know because they know that they give like- they give terrible food so maybe they already know that other people have this kind of stuff but-

(...) for the first kind of triage, let's say, they- they take care about him but they say they didn't investigate too much about what was his sickness and he says maybe because they already know what happens when you eat that food.

38-year-old Algerian man, interview held August 2025

Setting up ways of eating alternative food to the portions provided is not easy. Residents in Bustmantsi have learnt to manipulate thermos to use them to cook safely, and developed adapted systems for cooking their own food, which they have to buy through friends who will bring the items in visits to the detention camp.
Residents drink water from the sink or buy mineral water from machines.

Residents with experience in other European countries highlight the quality and range of choices for quality food in camps in other countries in comparison.

SUPPLY OF NON-FOOD ITEMS

On arrival in a detention camp, as we mentioned above, the new resident is deprived of their belongings. They are provided with underwear and basic clothes, matresses, pillows and blankets. In open camps, new residents are provided with bedware on arrival. Women are monthly provided with deodorants, soap, shampoo and pads.

At the Harmanli camp, different international organizations provide hygiene products and clothes for women as well as food products. The Red Cross brings clothes and shoes once a week, for men, women and children. No Name Kitchen come several days per week to a nearby park and provide products needed by camp residents, in accordance to their requests. Migrant Solidarity Bulgaria has been providing products requested by residents in the Busmantsi detention centre.

In the Liubimets detention camp there is a shop where residents can buy food and other items at a price much higher than normal. It is a private business occupying a warehouse space in the camp and to which residents can order goods. It opens daily for two hours, during lunch time.

"The Coca-Cola, Outside it's 2 leva, And inside Liubimets it's 10 leva."
45-year-old Syrian man, interview held May 2025

NEGLECT OF HEALTHCARE AND MEDICAL ATTENTION

Most respondents reported on the limited access to health services, both in detention centres and in open camps. For the sake of brevity, we bring a case of medical concern that illustrates the combination of neglect and mistreatment to which residents in Busmantsi are subjected. The story starts with an instance of food poisoning which becomes an indicator of appendicitis, diagnosed too late:

"During my stay in Busmantsi, I had food poisoning, severe food poisoning. And I went to the doctor in Busmantsi and the doctor kept stating that I was pretending and there wasn't anything wrong with me. He was trying to trick me, but in the end, my state was getting worse and worse and worse. So, in the end, they actually called in an outside doctor and they actually took me to hospital and they operated on me because they removed my appendix. So, I actually had issues with my appendix. It was swollen. So, it was a life- threatening situation. It had to be a life-threatening situation before they actually called outside medical help."
Syrian man in his 20s, interview held August 2025

Through his time in hospital, he was neglected by medical professionals and mistreated by security personnel:

"While I was in care in hospital, the mistreatment came at the hands of guards, not at the hands of the medical staff. Because I had two guards with me all the time. And they would handcuff me to the bed. The doctors in the hospital didn't say anything. When I asked to speak on the phone with my family, I was refused. There was a doctor who was going to help me communicate with my family, but he was scared from the police. I spent seven days in hospital, and then I spent 22 days in isolation in the Emergency Room, because there was supposed to be medical quarantine at the facility. But there was no medical supervision. I was basically just incarcerated for 22 days."
Syrian man in his 20s, interview held August 2025

The combination of police intervention with medical neglect results in the instrumentalisation of medical professionals and resources for repressive abuse.

The following account from the same respondent suggests another form of instrumentalisation. The medical doctor on duty in Busmantsi does check-ups on residents with the same consistent result – nothing to report, in spite of the physical evidence of abuse:

"There is a doctor. A 100-year-old doctor. A very old doctor. Even if you have been beaten, they still tell you that there is nothing to do with you. We were taken to the doctor after 10 days and it was a part of the process when we were released. So, we were taken to him, with 40 people waiting to visit him to go through the physical examination. We would just show our abdomens, our back, and he would just certify that we're fine and after this we're going. Even if you were stabbed, they would just say you're fine.
So, it was a procedure that we had to go through, but there was nothing. We didn't get any medical attention."
Syrian man in his 20s, interviewed August 2025

CONCLUSION: AN IMPLEMENTED, MONITORED, STRATEGIC POLICY

"Physical mistreatment was always there. We didn't even understand why. If we would talk, they would beat us"
(Venezuelan man sent by ICE from the US to a Salvadorean prison [7])

The experience of POMs trying to find refuge in Bulgaria or trying to cross it toward Central Europe resembles that of many people subjected to border violence across the world today. It is overall an experience of rejection and mistreatment, which our respondents perceive as directed at them as non-Bulgarians, i.e., motivated in racist or nationalist attitudes:

"The treatment is so bad. From the police, from the people, from many surroundings. I mean racism."
18-year-old Moroccan man, interview held April 2025

The following commentary, expressed rhetorically with litotes, indicates a common frustrated response to the Bulgarian experience: treatment in Bulgaria is perceived as shockingly contrary to what would be expected from an EU country:

[47]From the Al Jazeera documentary "Crackdown".

"I was extremely surprised with the nice treatment I got in Serbia because I didn't see this nice treatment anywhere else, and Serbia is not supposed to be a European Union country, but they treat us way better than Bulgaria. And they don't beat us, they don't scream at us, they don't hit us, you know, and so on."
28-year-old Syrian (Kurdish) woman, interviewed August 2025

It is implied that in Bulgaria they do beat people up and scream at them. Yet, as the same respondent explains further, the notification of inadequate treatment in Bulgaria is not taken in Central Europe as grounds to prevent deportation back to Bulgaria: The Dublin procedure seems to admit no exception on the grounds of risk of mistreatment:

"Then I got sent to Bulgaria [from Austria] after three months. And I was really upset because after I told them about the treatment in Bulgaria, and after I told them how I was mistreated in Bulgaria, how the situation in Bulgaria was terrible, about how I was treated- like how the police attacked some of the people with us on the way... I was expecting them to let me stay because they even gave me a lawyer to help me. But in the end, the last final decision was to return me. And they asked me about the reasons that I wanted to continue to Germany. So I told them about my mom, I told them about the really terrible treatment in Bulgaria, and because they told me that Bulgaria was supposed to be better than Serbia, I told them "No, in Serbia I used to consider myself in a humanitarian country, in a very developed country, maybe on the level of Austria and Germany of development, when it comes to at least treating us personally, compared to Bulgaria".

The practices of rejection, detention, manipulation, deceit, neglect and abuse which we describe in this report constitute evidence of a system for the processing of persons in need for refugee Bulgaria engineered to punish POMs and to frustrate their search for safety and for a better life. This system features the following components:

- Torture through **strategic neglect**: Subjecting persons to conditions which will provoke serious suffering and put their lives, health and physical integrity at risk; Taking away fundamental means of subsistence (food, water, clothes).
- Systematic neglect of people's **rights of property**, by confiscating, stealing or destroying their belongings.
- Criminal activity by state agents is performed routinely through strategies devised to keep the practice **covert** and guarantee **impunity** (e.g., taking immates to a room with no cameras to beat them up).

- Treating people as **objects**: Not informing people of where, why and for what purpose they are being transferred or held in detention.
- Treating people as **animals to be disciplined** and restrained through violence; ignoring or avoiding opportunities to improve people's conditons, even when the incumbents request intervention or support.
- Different restrictive rules are imposed but partially overlooked, which reproduces an **atmosphere of corruption** and impunity where the authorities are 'generously allowing' for people to break absurd and damaging regulations, indirectly forcing people to break rules. E.g., prohibition of kitchen appliances in residential settings where the food provided is inedible; or recommending people to try to smuggle themselves towards Central Europe.
- Maintaining **infrastructures, hygiene and basic provision of food** and other items at leveles that defy human dignity, abandoning people in residential facilities with minimal or no maintenance.

Finally, we raise the following recommendations:

To Bulgarian and European Union State agents:

- To build migration policies aimed at protecting the human dignity and human rights of all persons regardless their documentation status, and at prioritising public service over the restriction of fundamental freedoms.
- To investigate the practices documented in this report that may involve neglect, abuse or corruption in the behaviour of State agents or agents from NGOs sub-contracted by the Bulgarian State.
- To develop measures aimed at protecting institutions from impunity and corruption, while increasing the accountability, transparency and evaluation of organisms and professionals.

To researchers and journalists:

- To develop forms of documentation and analysis centered on the standpoint of those oppressed by institutions, recognizing their privileged capacity to describe and interpret the institutional complex designed to subject them.
- To extend research and documentation to relevant collectives under-represented in this report, such as women, children and LGBTQ persons.
- To develop research and investigative methods that interrogate institutional agents, practices and networks, and address problems relevant to the people on the receiving end of violence and repression.

In Europe Must Act we reaffirm our determination to keep documenting the experience and conditions of POMs; advocating for safe routes into a diverse and welcoming Europe; and building fair and dignified options to accommodate those forced to flee their homes for political, environmental or economic reasons.