



**COLLETTIVO
ROTTE BALCANICHE
ALTO VICENTINO**

REPORT N.1
BULGARIA, JULY AND AUGUST 2023

TORCHLIGHT

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE VIOLENT OPACITY OF THE EUROPEAN BORDER REGIME





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Since June 25, Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino has been present in the south-eastern region of Bulgaria, near the Turkish border, specifically between the towns of Harmanli and Svilengrad.

We are an informal group of activists with the threefold aim of actively supporting people in transit along the Balkan routes, collecting testimonies and producing documentation on police violence at the borders of Europe, and mobilising civil society on migration issues. In this sense, in the last three years we have been active in Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

The aim of this first report on Bulgaria, written from an independent and solidarity point of view after two months of being there, is to shed light on and denounce the racist violence of the authorities, which violates the fundamental rights of migrants.

The information reported here is the result of constant collective research work, testimonies come directly from the stories of the people encountered and are reported respecting the consent and safety of everyone.

In fact, most of the people involved are still in Bulgaria or in conditions of structural vulnerability and possible blackmailing, e.g., linked to the ongoing asylum procedure, and because of this they often avoid spreading what is happening at Europe's borders for fear of retaliation.

Although this brief paper focuses on the Bulgarian situation, we want to stress how the practices we observe here are coherent with the overall European design 'on migration and asylum': the Bulgarian-Turkish border is currently the land gateway to Europe.

1. The Bulgarian context

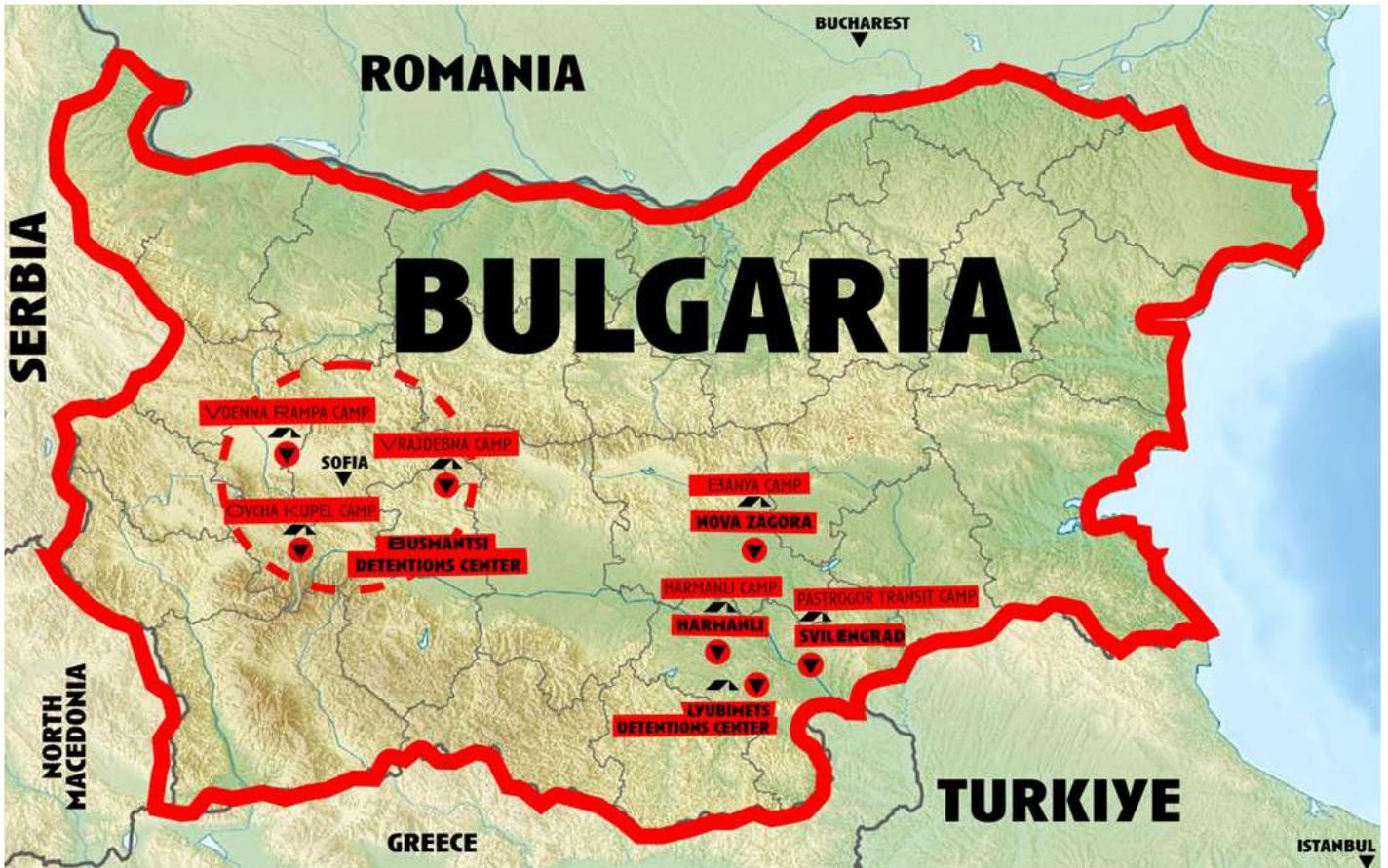


Fig 1: map of Bulgaria and its borders, in the map you see the different camps located on Bulgarian territory.

The need to delve into the Bulgarian context stems from the increase in transits observed in 2022, confirmed by data from the Ministry of the Interior, according to which '168 378 third-country nationals attempted to cross the country's borders in 2022, a number 3.1 times higher than in 2021 (55 012 persons)¹. The [statistics](#) released by the General Directorate of border police indicate a further intensification of the flows in the summer months of 2023, with a 73% increase in prevented illegal attempts to cross the Turkish-Bulgarian border in June and July, compared to the same months in 2022 (46 940 persons in 2023 and 27 083 in 2022).

From 1 January to 7 August 2023, there were, again according to the border police, 108 954 illegal crossing attempts prevented, compared to 67 846 in the corresponding period of 2022. Evidently, the increase in crossings and the increase in push-back² go hand in hand: it is the authorities themselves who claim this practice in the official media and statistics.

1 *РЕЗУЛТАТИ ОТ ДЕЙНОСТТА НА МВР ПРЕЗ 2022 г., Противодействие на миграционния натиск и граничен контрол* (Results of the Ministry of the Interior's activities in 2022, Countering migratory pressure and border control), p. 14

2 [According to the EU](#), itself, 'Push-backs (or rejections) refer to the various measures taken by states, sometimes involving third countries, which consist of forcibly rejecting persons attempting to cross a border, whether by land or sea. Without any assessment of their needs, violating their rights and any need for humanitarian protection.'

Such practices are also confirmed by third-party observers, such as the [Bulgarian Helsinki Committee](#), which in its report [‘Humans rights in Bulgaria in 2022’](#) underlines ‘a significant increase in the practice of push-backs’, noting in 2022 ‘another sad record of 5 268 alleged push-backs involving 87 647 persons’ (p. 91).

The rejections at the Bulgarian-Turkish border are accompanied by the systematic use of violence by the Bulgarian authorities: Human Rights Watch, for example, has long collected [testimonies](#) of people being beaten, robbed, stripped, and attacked by dogs.

In recent months, two investigations by the investigative journal Lighthouse Reports have further turned the spotlight on Bulgarian police violence, with the [footage](#) of the cage in the Sredets police station, inside which migrants were forced after capture, and that of the [shooting](#) of 19-year-old Syrian Abdullah El Rustum Mohammed, the first video evidence of the use of real bullets on European borders.

Systematic police violence has also been repeatedly witnessed by No Name Kitchen, thanks to [testimonies](#) collected from people once they arrived in Serbia, confirming organised beatings, the systematic use of dogs, theft, but also arbitrary detention in police stations and detention centres, and forcibly compelling people - when they are not pushed back - to leave their fingerprints and apply for protection in the country.



Fig 2 a backpack of the Bulgarian border police with the stickers ‘*Si vis pacem para bellum*’ and ‘*Violence and chaos my job here is done*’, mottos in use in neo-fascist circles traceable - in particular the latter - to the US white supremacist networks of 4chan, and the US border police. Sofia, July 2023.

Despite the fact that Article 13 of EU Regulation No. 604/2013 ([Dublino III](#)) stipulates that the Member State of first entry is responsible for examining asylum applications, Bulgaria is and remains a transit country, at the heart of the land routes leading from the Middle East and Africa to 'Europe' - Germany, France, Italy, etc. This transit dimension is also confirmed by the [data](#) on the abandonment of asylum procedures, witnessing the large number of people who leave the country without waiting for the outcome of their application³. Applying for protection in the country of first entry implies, as is well known, exposing oneself to the risk of deportation, linked to the registration of fingerprints in the Eurodac system. In the first three months of 2023, 108 persons were brought back to Bulgaria under Dublin procedures - from Germany, Austria and France - against 459 applications⁴. For 2023, the SAR (State Agency for Refugees) expects about 500 'Dublin' returns from other EU countries.

Factors contributing to the high flow of people through Bulgaria include the [further 'fortification'](#) of the land border between Greece and Turkey, which has been made less and less crossable in recent years. On the other hand, the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria in February 2023 aggravated an already tragic situation; the [economic crisis](#) both in the Anatolian country and in [North Africa](#) - many of the people in transit through Bulgaria are fleeing Morocco for 'economic' reasons - shows no sign of ending; the [policy of mass deportations](#) implemented by Erdoğan and [relaunched in the post-election period](#) puts the 3.6 million Syrian refugees in the country on the flight line.

Are you Syrious reports 950 people deported from Turkey to Syria in July, forced to sign a ['voluntary return'](#), and often repatriated to the northern areas, where the Turkish state is actively changing the demography of the areas under its control with a [policy of settlement and displacement](#).

Also, not to be forgotten is the constant exodus of the Afghan population, which is likewise exposed to violent Turkish institutional racism and the constant [risk of repatriation](#). In fact, the main [countries of origin](#) of people applying for protection in Bulgaria are Afghanistan and Syria, followed by Morocco and Iraq. It should be noted that many of the people coming from Syria, Turkey and Iraq are Kurdish, thus running an even greater risk in transit or staying in Erdoğan's regime. Despite this, there are numerous attempts by the Bulgarian authorities to repatriate Kurds dissidents to Turkey.

3 In June 2023, for example, 1829 asylum application procedures were discontinued because people left the country, compared to 1849 new applications. Updated asylum data are available on the [SAR website](#).

4 *О Т Ч Е Т за изпълнението на програмния бюджет на Министерството на вътрешните работи към първото шестмесечие на 2022 г.* ТТЕ on the activities carried out by the Quality Directorate of the International Protection Procedure for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.03.2023), p. 13

Since 21 April 2022, the government has activated 'an action plan for emergency situations', according to which 'additional forces and resources from other structures of the Ministry and the Armed Forces are implemented to strengthen border security by deploying joint border police units'⁵. During these weeks, we have been able to verify the presence of both patrols and army units and vehicles at the border, engaged in operations to apprehend and repel migrants. The Ministry of the Interior has equipped the border police with more staff, new cars, long-barreled weapons e guns - just a few weeks ago, Minister Demerdzhiev delivered 100 new Walther guns to the Elhovo station - all thanks to financial support from the European Union.

In fact, the Bulgarian-Turkish border is a high priority for the European Commission, as Von der Leyen herself wrote in an official letter on March 20, and it is precisely on this border that most of the 600 million Euro, made available for 2023 through the Frontex agency, will be spent to support member countries in border control and the purchase of technological devices.

The other objective, also stated by the President of the Commission, is to launch a pilot project in Bulgaria for 'accelerated border procedures', i.e. 'screening (identification), fast asylum procedures (safe third country/first country of asylum, safe country of origin, and security reasons) and immediate return' - with the support of Frontex, EUAA⁶ and Europol.

From the accounts of the people met and SAR documents, we know that accelerated asylum procedures are already taking place in the Pastrogor transit centre - also supported by a bilateral cooperation agreement between Bulgaria and Austria, after Austria, together with the Netherlands, had blocked Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen area due to its inability to control the border. Applications for protection, especially from North African applicants, are denied ex officio and after a maximum of 14 days people are forced to leave the camp, while they have to leave the country after a maximum of three months.

Frontex agents - who often wear the national uniforms of their countries - are part of the Joint Operation Terra, launched in 2022, and are present both at the official border crossings and the border police at the stations from which patrols leave to violently repel migrants, like the one in Sredets, where we saw two Dutch agents. Despite the close cooperation with the Bulgarian authorities, which suggests at least awareness if not direct involvement in illegal and violent actions - since they are working on a daily basis in the same stations - the European agency only opened SIR (Serious Incident Report) procedures after the outcry of some public complaints, such as those of Lighthouse Reports⁷.

5 *О Т Ч Е Т за изпълнението на програмния бюджет на Министерството на вътрешните работи към първото шестмесечие на 2022 г.* (TTE on the implementation of the planned budget of the Ministry of the Interior from the first half of 2022), p. 3

6 European Union Agency for Asylum, <https://euaa.europa.eu/>

7 Procedures 15368/2022 and 15549/2022 refer to the above-mentioned cases, part of whose documentation is available in the agency's public register at: <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/>

The SIR procedures are the reports that every participant in Frontex missions is obliged to make in the event of a suspected violation of fundamental rights, reports from which an internal investigation by designated *Fundamental Rights Monitors* should start⁸. These procedures, however, have ended up coming to nothing: on the one hand, the Directorate of the Bulgarian border police denies, even in the face of evidence, any violation of rights; on the other hand, Frontex, while putting pressure on the Bulgarian authorities, excludes any involvement and awareness on the part of its staff in the facts under investigation - as in the case of the detention cage in the Sredets police station, where its agents work every day. The partnership thus continues, amid hypocritical recommendations and training courses on respect for human rights.

As far as asylum seekers are concerned, the Bulgarian 'reception' system is managed by the government agency SAR, and consists of the ROC (Registration and reception centre) camps in **Voenna Rampa** (Sofia), **Ovcha Kupel** (Sofia), **Vrajdebna** (Sofia), **Banya** (Nova Zagora) and **Harmanli**, as well as the **Pastrogor** transit centre (located in the municipality of Svilengrad), where accelerated asylum procedures are carried out. In addition, the SAR is responsible for asylum seekers held in asylum detention, at the Busmantsi detention centre (Sofia).

Except for asylum detention, the detention centres are instead under the management of the Ministry of Interior and concern - according to article 44(6) of the Law on Foreigners (LARB) - persons from third countries (1) whose identity is uncertain, (2) who prevent the execution of the deportation order, (3) who might be hiding. However, people are systematically detained by order of the border police after entering the country illegally. There are two detention centres: **Busmantsi** and **Lyubimets**.

In the following paragraphs we will discuss only some of the salient issues that emerged during our stay, referring to future publications for further insights into the multiple dimensions of border violence experienced by migrants crossing Bulgaria. The aspects explored here are the living conditions in the Lyubimets detention centre, police violence on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and police violence on the Serbian-Bulgarian border.

As already noted, the information gathered comes from informal chats and semi-structured interviews conducted during daily encounters with people on the move. We therefore do not claim exhaustivity, but would like to assemble, over the course of a few reports, the complex mosaic faced by those who, by crossing increasingly fortified borders, challenge the European border regime. Starting from the migrants' self-narratives, we will therefore try to render explicit Bulgarian and European border practices, both in their recurrent and systematic features, and in the unpredictable arbitrariness of power, either bureaucratic and bodily, which conditions the individual experiences we report here.

⁸ Through the circumvention of these monitoring procedures, push-backs in the Aegean and failures to rescue in the central Mediterranean have been covered up in recent years, as shown by the [Olaf report](#) that led - along with other scandals - to the resignation of Director Leggeri in 2022.



Fig 3: NATO-type barbed wire covering the border fence between Bulgaria and Turkey. Hamzabeyli, August 2023.



Fig 4: The Pastrogor camp, built to be a detention centre and now in use as a transit centre. Pastrogor (Svilengrad), July 2023.



Fig 5: 'Discovery' cars in the border police station in Shtit. Shtit, July 2023.



Fig 6: A mixed patrol of Bulgarian and German border police at the Kapitan Andreevo border crossing. Kapitan Andreevo, July 2023.

2. The Lyubimets detention centre

In this first paragraph we will try to reconstruct what happens inside the Lyubimets detention facility, which for many of the migrants we met was their first landing on 'European' soil.

Located halfway between Harmanli and Svilengrad, it serves the entire south-eastern region of Bulgaria and is an almost obligatory passage for those who cross the Turkish-Bulgarian border and are not rejected. In addition to it, as written above, there is the Busmantsi detention centre on the outskirts of the capital.

Euphemistically called 'Special Home for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners' (SHTAF), these centres are - in theory - intended for those who have received an order of expulsion from Bulgarian territory (pre-removal detention centres), [according](#) to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). However, 98 percent of asylum seekers are initially detained there⁹, for a period of time that can vary from 15 days to multiple months, up to a maximum of 18.

This detention is not only illegitimate because it is a priori, but also has a structural nature. The Bulgarian authorities - again according to ECRE, but as also verified by our experience - justify the practice for identification needs of those whose identity is uncertain, or because of the recurrent lack of an interpreting service at the borders, which therefore does not allow people to apply for protection as soon as they are intercepted by the police or at the police station.

The unlivable conditions at the Lyubimets detention centre are one of the issues most stressed by people travelling through Bulgaria. In one of the stories, heard on July 25 in Svilengrad, the detention centre is succinctly described as follows: ***'honestly, there can't be such a place, there is no care, no food, no washing, nothing', 'there all the kids come out sick because of the bugs, the bed bugs and the food you can't even look at'*** (Svilengrad, 25/07/2023).

It is very common to hear stories of people falling ill in the centre because of bed bugs and very poor hygienic conditions. Another testimony, collected in Harmanli, tells of people having their fingers broken for asking to go to the bathroom at night, of the threats accompanying asylum applications when someone refuses to leave fingerprints, and of the detention of minors: ***'They used to lock the doors of the rooms at night, after 11 p.m., saying that anyone who dared to ring the bell to go to the bathroom would have their fingers broken', 'They used to put 4- and 5-year-old children with us, in the adults' rooms, and this is not acceptable. They were shouting at us, insulting us and hitting us'*** (Harmanli, 25/07/2023).

9 Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2022, p. 91

People of Moroccan origin whom we meet near the Pastrogor transit centre are usually detained in Lyubimets after being caught by the police when they are far from the Turkish border. In fact, transitants are often stopped and arrested in cars along the country's main roads - e.g. route 79, route 53, the A1 motorway - at numerous checkpoints, or in Sofia, in the flats where they stay before continuing their journey. Upon arrest they are often beaten, stripped and robbed of their personal belongings, such as phones, money, clothes, backpacks.

On arrival at Lyubimets, they wait standing in the courtyard for a few hours before being searched: any objects considered dangerous - lighters, blunt objects - and camera phones are confiscated.

Hence the impossibility of communicating with the outside world, except for the presence of a couple of camera-less mobile phones, in the possession of some inmates who charge to allow the others to make calls. For these reasons, the detainees' families usually lose track of their loved ones when they end up in Lyubimets, even for a long time. Several people contacted us for this reason, and it was only through the intervention of a lawyer that we were able to verify that they were actually detained in the centre.

After the inspection, men are taken to the main building where they are divided into rooms with 36 person capacity, but often fewer actual beds.

Women and children, on the other hand, are taken to containers with 4 persons capacity each. However, this division is not always respected: sometimes some men are taken to the containers and minors, even unaccompanied ones, are kept in the 36-person rooms with the adults, as repeatedly reported in the stories. The [overall capacity of the detention centre](#) is 660 people.

People detained in the center are forbidden to leave their room, except in the following cases: they can go to the refectory for breakfast from 9.00 to 10.00, lunch from 12.00 to 13.00, dinner from 18.00 to 19.00; as an alternative to lunch, from 12.00 to 13.00 they can go to a market inside the centre escorted by the police, but there is no possibility to cook the food they have bought; during the afternoon they are brought to the yard for an hour of air; they can use showers from 20.00 to 21.00.

The variability of what the detainees are allowed to do is evident and depends on the arbitrariness of the individual police officers. In general, meals are distributed upon presentation of a ticket, which is given to them the day before, at the time of the evening police patrol. Portions are insufficient - for example, a glass of soup for lunch - and the food is often inedible. Buying food at the market is prohibitively expensive, not to mention that most people are stripped of their money upon arrest. Even access to showers is only apparent, with all detainees having access to the same shower room for only one hour, with no hygienic products available.

Severely deficient medical care is one of the most recurring themes: *'there is no medical care. You go to the doctor, no matter how sick you are, you are given a pill or you are sent away'* (Harmanli, 28/08/2023), *'When we said we needed a doctor, they shouted at us, and the doctor shouted at us too. Everyone shouted at us and beat us up'* (Harmanli, 25/07/2023).

There is only one doctor working in the camp, visits are possible only upon police approval and are rough, if not useless: the doctor only delivers medicine after payment and many testified that they were discharged because they were 'in good health', despite visible injuries and the risk of permanent damage.

For example, we have known and followed the story of a woman, 8 months pregnant and with two minors, who was detained for 19 days despite being in critical health condition after the long journey, and who was always denied a hospital visit; and the story of four young men beaten to a pulp by Bulgarian police on the Serbian border, thus risking to have fractures and internal lacerations, who were never allowed to see the doctor for fear of reprisals by the police.

During the detention period, the Moroccan people we met - subjected to an [accelerated asylum application procedure](#) with a [denial rate close to 100%](#)¹⁰ - conducted three interviews with UNHCR officials.



Fig 7: A telephone broken by the police in the Busmantsi detention centre. Svilengrad, 22/07/2023.

10 SAR data on asylum procedures, including accelerated procedures, for the first months of 2023 are also available at [this link](#)

The first is aimed at voluntary repatriation: in order to obtain the interviewees' consent, they are promised sums of money and fanciful offers of work or study; then the officials threaten to further prolong detention if repatriation is not accepted.

The second focuses on improbable 'political' questions aimed at probing the subjects' alleged dangerousness: past service in the army or police, party affiliation, criminal record, religious beliefs, knowledge of the Koran and *jihad*. Only at the third interview, conducted after more than 10 days of detention, do officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees allow the asylum application to be signed. No further questions are asked, but signing is mandatory to leave the detention centre usually within the next 7 days and be transferred to an open camp, where they will be allowed to stay for up to 14 days, the time needed to finish the accelerated procedure and receive a denial of the application.



Fig 8: People suffer from bed bugs in mattresses and insect bites, linked to poor hygienic conditions, both in detention centres and in open camps. Svilengrad, 22/07/2023.



Fig 9: The border police station in Sredets. Sredets, April 2023.

The conditions in the Busmantsi centre are very similar to those in Lyubimets. With regard to Busmantsi, there are also accounts of exemplary beatings upon arrival at the centre, against a few people chosen at random by a group: *'when I entered the camp, they broke my phone, stripped me of all my clothes and hit me very hard. I really don't know why'* (Svilengrad, 22/07/2023).

Moreover, in Busmantsi as well as in Lyubimets, people from some countries considered safe, and with which Bulgaria is able to organise repatriations, live in constant and concrete risk of deportation, which for most of them means danger to their lives. Among them are Iranian dissidents fleeing the regime and Kurds from Turkey.

In recent months, several such deportations have been foiled only thanks to the intervention of solidarians who have waged valuable and indispensable legal battles.

3. Violence and rejections along the Bulgarian-Turkish border

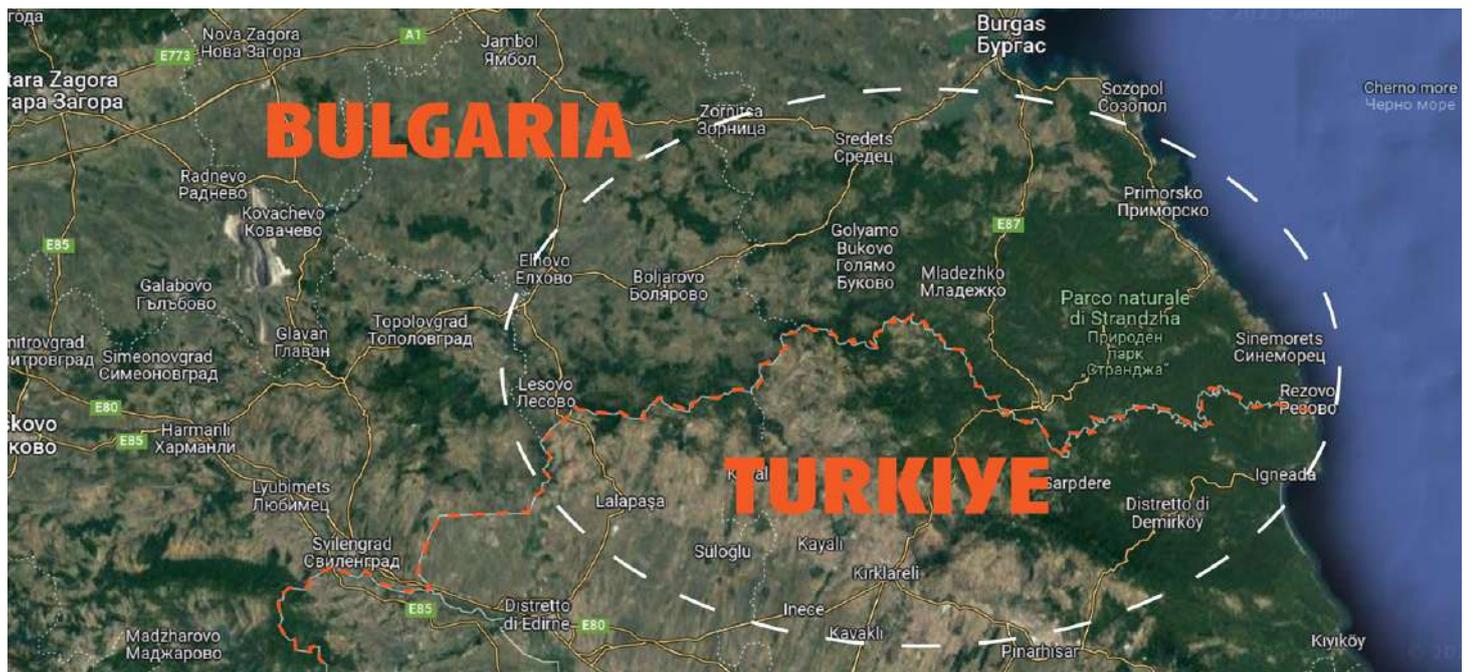


Fig 10: the Bulgarian-Turkish border. From Lesovo to the Strandzha Nature Park in the Malko Tarnovo area, the border forests are heavily traversed.

In the last weeks of fieldwork, we collected a number of testimonies of people on the move who have been subjected to illegal push-backs and other human rights violations by the Bulgarian police. These accounts refer both to cases of informal push-back that occurred along the Turkish-Bulgarian border, and to cases of internal violence that occurred further north, along the border with Serbia. In this section we will try to give an overview of the Bulgarian police violence occurring along the border area with Turkey, reporting some of the stories we have heard.

We refer to incidents that took place over a period of approximately July up to six months ago. It is difficult to retrieve more recent testimonies because our encounters with migrants occur on average at least two weeks after their last arrest and their subsequent imprisonment in the Lyubimets and Busmantsi detention centres.

We quoted through inverted commas the direct words of people who were willing to share their experience at the border, translated during the conversations with a simultaneous translation app and reported here in respect of their privacy. The collected push-back narratives occurred all throughout the Bulgarian-Turkish border area, but they are particularly frequent in the regions of Jambol and Burgas, which are affected by a more substantial passage of people trying to reach Europe from Turkey.

M, a Moroccan man in his 40s, confirms how in his experience, at each attempt, he was arrested and then rejected in several places, which are always around *'an area called 79, an area called 87 or an area called 53'*.

The numbers he refers to represent three roads: the *E87 road*, with a north-south direction, which from Turkey enters Bulgaria near the town of Malko Tărnovo, continuing all the way to Burgas; the state *road 79*, which connects the towns of Burgas and Elhovo from east to west; and the state *road 53*, which from Sredets, via Jambol, reaches Veliko Tărnovo.

The locations mentioned here have been confirmed to us several times by the people interviewed.

For example, on July 17 we met in Svilengrad a group of twenty-one people from Morocco who were rejected four times in Turkey. All four rejections took place in the area of Malko Tărnovo, and were characterised - in addition to the impossibility of seeking asylum - by physical violence: people were attacked by dogs, beaten with baseball bats, stripped and robbed.

A practice that seems to be the standard method of action of the Bulgarian border police.

'Like we were animals' is a phrase often repeated by people on the move when they are asked to describe their experience of violence in Bulgaria.

Exemplary of the high level of violence is the story of H, a 28-year-old from Morocco:

'As soon as we drove to our home in the capital, Sofia, I had high hopes for the success of this trip, but my hopes were dashed as soon as we crossed the fence a few kilometres away, when we were surprised by the police in front of us. Accompanied by trained dogs, we could not escape, so they caught us and started beating us one by one. They beat us hard on the head and sent us back to Turkey, then we went to Istanbul for treatment and could not leave the house for a week because of the many bruises on our bodies.'

(Svilengrad, 02/08/23)

The systematic use of trained dogs by the Bulgarian border police is a recurring fact. They are used not only as an element of intimidation, but also as a direct 'weapon', as witnessed by the experience of R, from Morocco, who was traveling with his friend I:

'We entered Bulgarian land and walked for about six days, through mountainous and rough roads, very difficult and dangerous, and we did the road at night. We were surprised by the police dogs, of which there were three, and the dogs attacked us, they attacked us one by one. They attacked us forcefully and harshly and then starved us in a truck with " written on it. They also beat us before taking us out of the fence. So my journey ended in great disappointment and our bodies were bruised and badly hurt.' (Svilengrad, 02/08/23)

Arbitrary expulsions in Turkey, and the associated violence, are not episodic but a systematic and normalised practice, as can also be seen from the quantitative data in the introduction to this report. The high number of push-backs is also confirmed by the multiple attempts to cross the border that almost all the people we met experienced. We rarely meet people who have attempted to cross the border only once.

For example, on August 3 in Svilengrad we met I., who is 25 years old and comes from Morocco. He told us that he has been trying to get to Bulgaria from Turkey for eight months, for a total of 18 attempts. He said he had been beaten and robbed of clothes and money by the police almost every time. M, whom we have already mentioned, has tried to cross the border into Turkey 12 times, since May 2022: *'On each trip, the police arrested me, took everything, beat me, left me in the forest without clothes, without anything, and made me go back to Turkey. In short, I would never think of making another attempt'*.

We now report a case involving a group of 24 people from Syria, from an interview made on July 10 in Harmanli. Although it refers to events that happened in January 2023, we feel it is important to share it because of its richness of detail and because it is also representative of other more recent testimonies, collected in recent weeks, which, however, lack the same completeness for various contextual reasons.

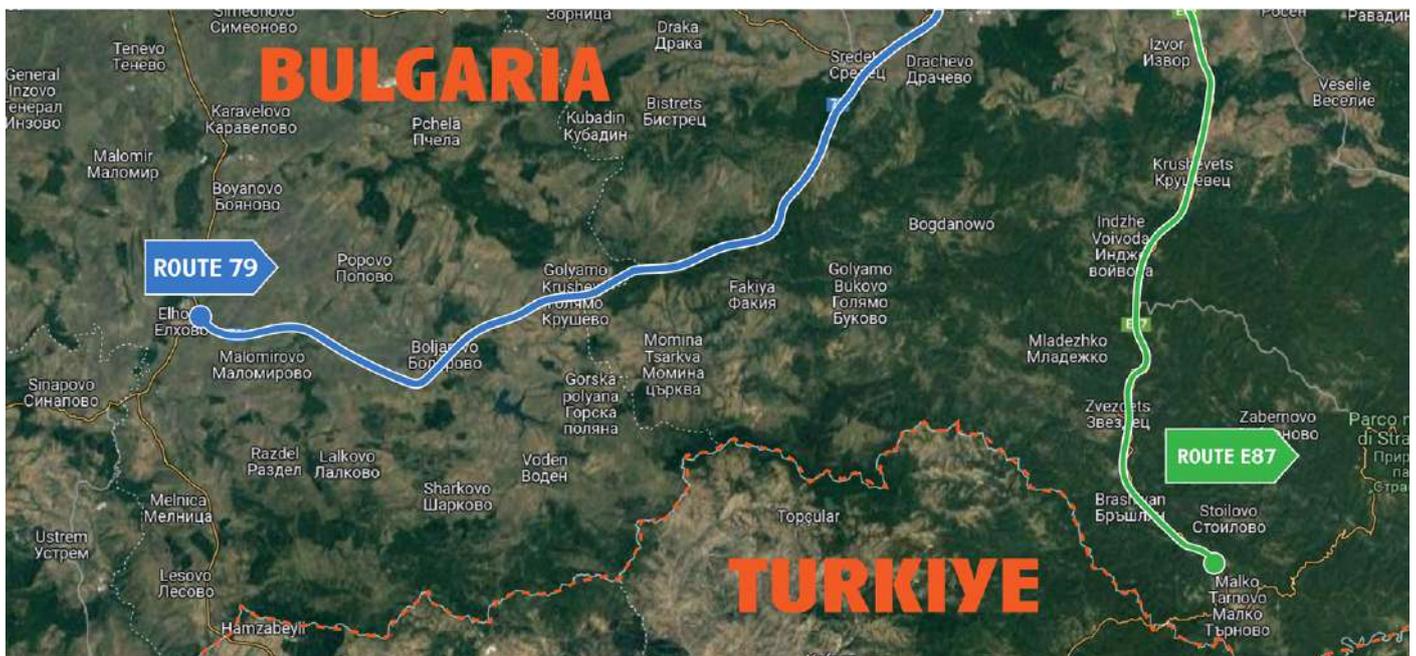


Fig 11: the Bulgarian-Turkish border in more detail. Note Route 79, which connects Elhovo to Sredets, and the E87, which connects Malko Tarnovo to Burgas, areas of intense transit and among the most patrolled roads in the country.

The story, shared by a man who was part of the group, begins after crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border. They walked for two days until they arrived in Drachevo, near Sredets.

A little further on (at coordinates 42.356760, 27.244244) they found a Bulgarian *border police* car, and were arrested by two policemen in green uniforms who stole their phones and took them to the police station in Sredets. When they got out of the car they punched them in the face, after which they were made to lie on their stomachs and were kicked for an hour. Once the beating was over, the *border police* took their shoes and ushered them into the cage - the same one that was filmed in the Lighthouse Reports video - in the courtyard of the plant.

Asked for some water to drink, the police replied **'Shut up! Or we will beat you up!'** They were left inside this cage, in pain, without water, without food. At some point, five hours later, the police arrived with another group of 50 people. They loaded all 75 of them onto a military truck to take them back to Turkey. Before they reached the border they had to walk two hours - remember they were barefoot. When they arrived at the fence they found five soldiers waiting for them, wearing army uniforms and black balaclavas.

The soldiers opened a hole in the fence and let the 75 people through one by one, beating each one mercilessly as they crossed the border. When they all passed through, they fired bullets in the air to scare them off.

After the articles about the Sredets cage came out, it seems that it is no longer in use, but detention of migrants in police stations and informal places before refoulement continues. We were also able to verify, with our own eyes, the use of military trucks to load tens or hundreds of migrants once arrested and transport them to the border, where they are then pushed back. The crossing of the fence in order to re-enter Turkey can be done either through the swing gates along it, or through the same gates used by migrants. The moment of crossing, i.e. the actual push-back, is almost always violent, with people being pulled out one by one and beaten by soldiers with their face covered.

The use of firearms to frighten and intimidate people has also been repeatedly confirmed. AR, a man in his 40s from Syria, for example, told us about this. He has traveled with two other men, his friends, together they have tested this border 13 times. During our meeting he tells us about his second-to-last attempt to reach Bulgarian territory, in June.

‘ [...] we were arrested and the Bulgarian police stole our phones, food, personal belongings and equipment; we were forced to take off our shoes and returned to Turkey through an unofficial border gate, and the Bulgarian police entered Turkish territory behind us for about five metres. There was a river more than five metres wide, flowing fast, with a depth of more than 170 cm. We were forced to cross this river to reach the other side. The Bulgarian police were watching us. When our group completed the crossing it was completed by shooting behind us.’ (Harmanli, 27/07/23)

Although firearms are usually used to shoot into the air, we know that in some cases they have been used intentionally targeting people, as confirmed by the case of [Abdullah El Rustum Mohammed](#) and other testimonies we have collected in Turkey, in the district of Edirne, which we cannot report here for safety reasons.

AR ends his testimony by recounting his last crossing, which ended with his arrest and subsequent detention in the Lyubimets centre, which lasted 20 days. During his detention in the police station, which lasted from 28/06/23 to 30/06/23, AR denounces various acts of violence by the authorities, from the theft of money to the denial of food and water. Two significant elements emerge from his account. The first concerns the composition of the group: they were in fact traveling with a group of about 45 people, including six minors aged 14, 15 and 18. In addition, there was also a pregnant woman in her ninth month, who was only a few days away from giving birth, and two elderly men whose ages he cannot specify.

In addition, AR highlights the treatment of a friend who suffers from diabetes: the police took his medications, broke them and threw them away. For the two days in the police station and for the next 20 in the centre of Lyubimets, the man was left without the medicines vital for his condition as a diabetic.

The second element that emerged was the presence of the German police, together with the Bulgarian police, throughout the arrest and detention in the police station. To a question of clarification on the subject, they replied:

‘The Bulgarian police wore green uniforms, while the German police wore blue uniforms’.

Multiple violations of the fundamental rights of people on the move are intertwined on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and the use of physical violence only aggravates already unlawful acts such as mass refoulement, which explicitly violate the Geneva Convention, the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum enshrined therein.

A peculiar case, in this sense, is that of M, a Moroccan man persecuted in his country for religious reasons, who decided to present himself on 04/07 at the official border crossing between Bulgaria and Turkey, in Kapitan Andreevo, to formally apply for international protection without having to enter the country 'illegally'. As recounted in his own words - written in an email he sent to the Collective - at the official border crossing, amidst the cars of tourists and travellers, the same pattern of physical violence and *push-back* that occurs in the green border woods was repeated:

'I crossed the Turkish-Bulgarian border through the Kapıkule and Kapitan Andreevo crossings on the date above. I approached the Bulgarian authorities, seeking asylum and international protection due to the persecution I faced in my home country.

I explicitly requested them to inform the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about my situation and stated my refusal to return to Turkey. Regrettably, I was subjected to unimaginable brutality instead of receiving the assistance and protection that international law guarantees.

The Bulgarian authorities held me against my will and subjected me to severe physical assault, causing me to lose consciousness. During this ordeal, they also forcefully confiscated 2000 euros, which I was carrying. Furthermore, they forcibly placed me on a Turkish bus heading back to Turkey, pressuring the driver to return me against my will. It is crucial to note that I did not break any laws nor crossed the Bulgarian border illegally. I entered through an official border crossing, lawfully requesting the protection and rights guaranteed by international law.' (05/08/2023)

The abuse by the Bulgarian police was subsequently repeated in the following attempt to confront the Bulgarian border authorities:

'Upon my arrival in Turkey, I reported the incident to the Turkish customs officers, who subsequently inquired with their Bulgarian counterparts about the events. Upon their return, they advised me to return to the Bulgarian border and request a meeting with the Bulgarian Chief of Police. However, when I complied, I faced further physical and verbal abuse by a Bulgarian border police man. He even threatened to kill me with a bullet to the head unless I returned, even after I demanded the return of the stolen 2000 euros.'

The severe physical assault perpetrated by the Bulgarian police has caused significant harm to me. As a result of this brutal assault, I have sustained a concussion, which has resulted in difficulties in moving my right hand, severe headaches, and profound challenges with balance, and coordination.' (05/08/2023)

In the next section, we will move further north, close to the border with Serbia, where Bulgarian police violence reproduces the same patterns just reported.

Fig 12: The barbed wire fence that follows the entire border line between Bulgaria and Turkey. Hamzabeyli, 12/08/2023.



Fig 13: one of the swinging doors along the fence that are used for rejections. Hamzabeyli, 12/08/2023.



4. Violence on the Serbian-Bulgarian border

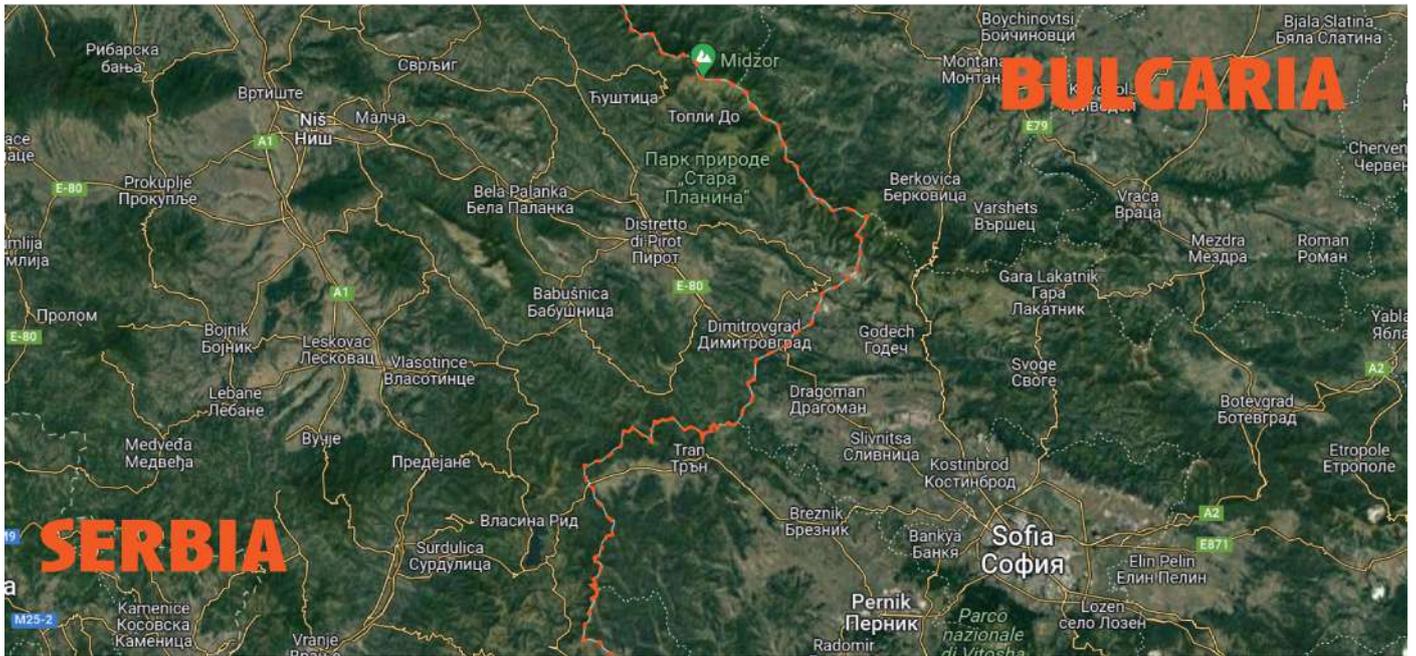


Fig 14: the Serbian-Bulgarian border. Many people travel from Sofia to the Pirot camp, crossing the guarded border mountains on foot.

Many people cross the country transversally from south-west to north-east, passing through the capital, then heading towards the towns of Dragoman and Kalotina to cross the border on foot through the forested mountains. Often, the most immediate destination is the Serbian transit camp of Pirot, which is located just a few kilometers from the border and currently hosts- according to witnesses - about 500 people. The route then continues towards Hungary, for those moving towards Germany, or towards Bosnia for those moving towards Italy, although it clashes with an increasingly militarised Serbian territory that is difficult to cross¹¹.

The hope is to pass through Bulgaria without being caught by the police, but very often people on the move are stopped along the way near the border with Serbia.

The violence of the Bulgarian police surprisingly expresses itself not only at the Turkish border but also at the 'exit' border, the Serbian one. Probably, the efforts to control people trying to leave the country is linked to the delicate European political balance and to Bulgaria's need to prove that it knows how to manage migratory flows and act as Europe's shield.

Up to now, we didn't hear stories of push-backs by the Serbian police. Instead, there are many people on the move who report being stopped by the Bulgarian border police just before the border with Serbia. In these cases, they are not pushed back to Turkey, as is usually the case with those intercepted in the regions of Jambol and Burgas, but are taken to the nearest police stations

11 see, for example, the reports by klikAktiv (<https://klikaktiv.org/>)

and then transferred to detention centres or subjected to different treatment depending on their status - for example, if a person is registered as an asylum seeker or if it is the first time he/she have been intercepted by the authorities.

During detention in the police stations - which lasts a few days - very often people are given neither water nor food. One group of migrants, of Moroccan origin, recounts that they were only given pork: a real violence when one considers that the majority of people, as in their case, are Muslims. The violence is not episodic but systematic and quite similar to that at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. In fact, in the same way, people are forced to take off their clothes, remaining in their underwear, and are then beaten with baseball bats and attacked by dogs trained to bite.

Phones are broken or confiscated, as well as money, credit cards and good clothes.

On July 12 we met a group of men from Morocco in Svilengrad who told us about four of their friends who are in such a critical condition in the Pastrogor camp that they are unable to get out of bed. A few days earlier they had been caught by the Bulgarian border police near the border with Serbia, and after their hands were tied behind their back, they were beaten for an hour and a half with clubs.

We met them a few days later, visibly limping, their legs and feet swollen, their arms and backs covered in bruises. They have also been hit repeatedly in the head.

They are afraid to talk about it with the camp doctor but also with us, for fear of police retaliation if it gets out that they have spoken about the incident.



Fig 15: Dog bite on the side, by Bulgarian police at the border with Serbia. Harmanli, 02/08/2023.

Two other people, Syrian nationals, told us on August 2 about their experience at the Bulgarian-Serbian border, only five days earlier:

'We left the Harmanli camp to reach Serbia [...] To do the last stretch we got on the train, to go to the Kalotina crossing. As soon as we got off the train, we were found by three border police guards with dogs. They stopped us and ordered us to stay on the ground with our hands behind our heads. They shouted at us to be quiet and as they did so they released the dogs who bit us on the legs and hips.

This lasted for a few minutes and then they loaded us into a van and took us to a border police station. In this station there were other police men who started insulting us. There they kicked us, laughed and told us to be quiet and not to speak for any reason.

This lasted four hours and after checking our documents and verifying that we had a green card [registration card in the camp that allows presence in Bulgaria] they loaded us into a van, we drove a few kilometers and they dumped us in the middle of the countryside and told us to leave [...] No one cured me, not even the doctor at the Harmanli camp after I returned. Now I am very scared, I have no intention of trying the game again. I am too scared and at night I still think about the barking of the dogs and their bites.

My legs hurt, I can't stand.' (Harmanli, 02/08/2023)

Another testimony of some men from Morocco confirms the above:

'Yes, they caught us on the border with Serbia and took us to a small police station. They kept us there for two days without eating and drinking before we were taken to the detention centre. We had been on the road for seven days after crossing the border into Turkey. We don't know why, but the police beat us.

They told us to take off our clothes and then they hit us.' (Svilengrad, 22/07/2023)

Fig 16: Dog bite on the stomach, by Bulgarian police on the border with Serbia. Harmanli, 22/07/2023.



5. Conclusions

In these two months of presence in Bulgaria, we have put into practice actions of solidarity, concretely supporting people on the move, but also carried out research and testimony-gathering work. This report begins a journey of publications - intended in the deepest sense of making something publicly known - of what we have heard and seen on the border.

We have started from what we have encountered most insistently during this period of stay: the accounts of the detention centres, through which almost all migrants pass, and the violence that is daily deployed along Bulgaria's borders. We have not reported, in this first publication, other aspects of the Bulgarian context that we will deepen in a second step, such as the living conditions in the open camps, the omissions and lies of the authorities in the 'search and rescue operations'¹², the problem of recognition and repatriation of bodies, the dozens of desaparecidos in the forests along the border.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the need from which the editing of this paper started. We are trying to shed light on the violent opacity of the European border regime and how it materialises on Bulgarian territory. This report is therefore meant to be a 'speaking out' - from a position of solidarity but rigorous in reporting the facts - in order to denounce the systematic violence we keep observing and fighting against. A necessity that arises, on the one hand, from recognising the opacity and complicity surrounding the actions of the Bulgarian and European authorities, and on the other, from wanting to image and construct different practices that challenge the European border regime and actively support migrants who do likewise. Writing, in this sense, represents one of the many tools to raise voices and practices aimed at changing the present state of affairs.

12 The Collective is also engaged in responding to numerous reports of people on the move who are unable to continue their journey and are in a critical medical condition, stranded in the forests along the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Two reports of 'SAR' (search and rescue) operations have already been published in Melting Pot Europa, and are available in Italian and English at the following links:

<https://www.meltingpot.org/en/2023/08/bulgaria-let-somebody-die-is-killing/>,

<https://www.meltingpot.org/en/2023/08/bulgaria-for-all-border-deaths/>

In our work, from the Harmanli park in the food distributions to the rescues along route 79, we feel increasingly caught between the inhumanity of what the people on the move experience and the overweening power of the authorities, who also try to repress us and our odd and annoying presence. In addition to the 'antagonistic solidarity' acted out in those border territories, we therefore feel the pressing urge to bring our voice - and that of the people we meet - into other virtual and physical spaces, so that it can be heard outside of us.

Here, at Europe's furthest border, we are confronted with powerlessness, in the face of a system of oppression that involves everyone, from the small municipality of Harmanli to the European Commission, from the individual border police man to the director of Frontex.

In the light of this, this present report - like our presence on the borders - is meant to be a seed. Indeed, we are driven by the awareness that it is only in a multiplicity of people and possible practices that we can dismantle this impotence and, by using solidarity as our weapon and recognising the radicality of freedom of movement struggles, open breaches in the barbed wires of fortress Europe.



**COLLETTIVO
ROTTE BALCANICHE
ALTO VICENTINO**

TORCHLIGHT

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE VIOLENT OPACITY OF THE EUROPEAN BORDER REGIME

REPORT N.1

BULGARIA, JULY AND AUGUST 2023