

SAFE PASSAGE

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Testimony of people arriving in Dimitrovgrad, Serbia from Bulgaria

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights

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Context

Whilst authorities along what is now commonly known as the Western Balkans route have attempted to facilitate the movement of refugees and migrants, for those traveling through Bulgaria the situation appears to be much tougher, with frequent allegations of abuse and ill-treatment by the authorities and exploitation by smugglers. On 15 October an Afghan refugee was shot dead near the Turkey-Bulgaria border. People entering Serbia from Bulgaria mostly come from Afghanistan, but some also come from Syria and Iraq. This route is considered cheaper or safer than going via boat to Greece. Despite the concerning accounts of abuse, not enough attention has been devoted to this issue. More than 200 refugees cross the border with Bulgaria daily. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights has also for the past five months been documenting the experiences of people on this route when they arrive in Belgrade.

Safe Passage

Testimony of people arriving in Dimitrovgrad, Serbia from Bulgaria

More than 200 people arrive every day to Dimitrovgrad after having walked through the mountains for several days. Many are ill-prepared for the sudden decrease in the temperature, seeing as how they are still dressed in light clothes and summer footwear. Upon completion of the twenty-minute long registration procedure at the police station, a basic medical examination and receiving an aid package from the Red Cross of Serbia, they are referred to the bus parked nearby. There are up to four departures to Belgrade daily and the price of the ticket is 25 Euros. Those who do not have the money to continue their travel westwards reside in an improvised camp in front of the police station until they receive money from family or friends. The interviews were conducted with around twenty groups consisting of approximately 110 refugees altogether. Their countries of origin include Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Refugees from Afghanistan were mostly of Pashto origin and refugees from Syria and Iraq were of Kurdish origin. All of the refugees interviewed, except those who had not had any contact with the police, reported ill-treatment in Bulgaria. These allegations are largely consistent and include extortion, robbing, physical violence, use of weapons, threats of deportation and attacks by police dogs. The majority of these incidents happened along in border areas, mainly at the border with Turkey, where many refugees experienced shootings and dog attacks. Some of them spent some time in the closed asylum centres near Sofia, Vrazhdebna or Busmantsi, and reported having been abused by the police and centres' management. Incidents occurred also at the border with Serbia, but to a lesser extent. Refugees claim to have been robbed at the border with Serbia by the Bulgarian police in order not to be detained for illegal stay. Registering in Serbia implies expressing the intention to seek asylum, which is the first stage in the asylum procedure. With the obtained certificates, asylum-

seekers are granted 72 hours to go to one of the asylum centres and submit an application, but the vast majority leave Serbia within that time limit. Refugees who attempt to seek asylum in Serbia face an inefficient and unfair asylum procedure, followed with no real prospects for the integration of persons granted international protection in Serbia.

Testimonies

A group of seven refugees from Kabul, Afghanistan, including one woman, was registered in Dimitrovgrad on 20 October, only a few hours upon their arrival to Serbia. The decision to leave Kabul was made several months ago for reasons of physical safety and seeking better life conditions far away from Afghanistan. They claim to have been subjected to chain push-back from Turkey to Iran, and then to Afghanistan three times before finally succeeding in entering Turkish territory. Istanbul was their home for a month, but they were determined to reach Germany. The reason for choosing the route through Bulgaria, as opposed to the one through Greece and Macedonia, is the fact that it is the closest way to reach their final destination. They reported ill-treatment by the Bulgarian police in the border area with Turkey, where they had experienced physical violence and some of them were injured when police dogs were unleashed at them in order to prevent refugees from entering Bulgarian territory. They managed to escape, but got lost in the woods. They eventually reached Sofia, but were intercepted by the police on the street and detained for illegal entry. They spent about a month in Bulgaria, out of which 15-20 days in Vrazhdebna camp. One of them cites that he would rather go back to Afghanistan than stay in Bulgaria, bearing in mind the treatment he and his group have been subjected to. The next stop for this group is Belgrade, where they will remain for only a few hours before heading towards the Croatian border.

A 17-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan is traveling with five of his friends, also minors. They all decided to leave home due to the unbearable living conditions in Afghanistan. The Taliban threatened them and their families as they did not want to fight and "risk their lives for nothing". After reaching Istanbul, Turkey, they were approached by a man who offered to transfer them across the border to Bulgaria in exchange for 1500 Euros per person. The Greek route was much more expensive and they decided to go through Bulgaria, even though they had heard stories about police brutality. Having crossed the border, they were held by smugglers in a house in the woods near Sofia for seven days before they were transported to the border with Serbia. The Bulgarian police caught them about an hour later and tried to extort them in exchange for not treating them as an illegal migrants. As they were without any money or documents, police arrested and detained them. They complained about poor conditions in the police station where they had been detained – a cold cell where they were deprived of food and water. The next day they were transferred to Busmantsi, where they spent about two weeks, got registered, underwent medical examinations etc. They spent 15 days in Busmantsi, with nothing but a piece of bread and a cup of tea for breakfast and a poorly-cooked meal for lunch. Upon release, they continued their journey towards Western Europe and the next stop was Dimitrovgrad, Serbia. They got registered and expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia even though they want to leave as soon as possible.

An 18-year-old refugee from Kandahar, Afghanistan had been an interpreter for the US army for five years. He used to love his job and was satisfied with the salary, but he started receiving death threats by the Talibans accusing him of being a traitor. Witnessing executions almost every day and fearing for his life, this young man made the hardest decision in his life – to leave his home and to find a better life somewhere in Europe. Smuggling was arranged in Kandahar, where he received instructions on how to meet with another smuggling group in each of the

countries that he passed through. Smugglers informed him that this was, in fact, the safer route, compared to the one going through Greece and Macedonia. He claims to have spent 7000 Dollars in order to reach Bulgaria and additional 1800 Euros for the transportation through Bulgaria. Somewhere near Sofia, police intercepted the car that he and a few other refugees were in. They were frightened by the word "deportation" that the police officers repeated over and over again, offering them to buy their freedom for 400 Euros each. After bribing the police officers, the group continued their way to the Serbian border, where they separated and he managed to reach Dimitrovgrad. Belgrade is the next stop. That is where he will meet the final smuggling group that will transport him to the European Union.

L. (22) is traveling with a larger group of Pashto refugees from Kabul, Afghanistan. Their journey was plagued with obstacles and uncertainty, fear of deportation and death. L. has a little brother in Kabul who is in need of very expensive medical assistance and was not able to travel alongside with him. The plan is to try to reach Germany, seek asylum there, send money for the medical treatment of his brother and then reunite. For L., Germany is the light at the end of the tunnel, a place where he will find his peace and happiness. He chose the route through Bulgaria, as the smugglers misinformed him that there are sharks in the Aegean sea. After crossing the border from Turkey into Bulgaria, he was intercepted by police officers demanding to see his documents and a registration paper. As he had not gotten registered and did not have any documents, one of the police officers physically assaulted him, hitting him in the head with a pistol grip. L. was then taken to the police station where he underwent the registration process. Upon having been registered, L. joined the group of Pashto refugees on their way to Serbia, ending up in Dimitrovgrad several days later. They all got registered as asylum-seekers in Serbia, even though they have the intention to seek asylum in Germany. Upon arrival to Belgrade, they will buy the

bus ticket to Šid and leave Serbia immediately, fearing that the border with Croatia could close soon.

A group of about ten refugees from Afghanistan arrived in Dimitrovgrad, Serbia on 20 October. They decided to take the Bulgarian route because they are afraid of the water and were informed by the other refugees in Turkey that there are sharks in Aegean Sea. Adversities began right after they had been transferred across the border from Turkey to Bulgaria. They arrived in Bulgaria in the middle of the night and witnessed police brutality towards another group of refugees. They were frightened and tried to find a place to hide, but the situation escalated and they found themselves in the middle of a crowd. One of them claims to have seen a refugee being hurt when police officer pressed a gun to his forehead, but he was not able to see the face of the police officer due to the darkness. They also claim to see refugees lying on the ground, unconscious. The police managed to catch and beat them, taking their money, valuables, mobile phones, even their food and water. However, they had been advised by the others that had experienced incidents like these to hide their money in the seams of their clothes in order to avoid being left with nothing in a foreign country. Using the money they had preserved, they moved on with their journey to the border with Serbia. In the woods near the border, the police caught them once again. This time, police officers released dogs on them, and running away they heard gun shots. At one point they realized that seven people from their group were missing. They have not had contact with them since. The group is convinced that the smugglers cooperate with the Bulgarian police and even claim to have seen them exchange money.

A group of Kurdish refugees, including four small children and their mothers, from Syria and Iraq arrived to Dimitrovgrad on 21 October, got registered and were waiting for the bus to depart for Belgrade. They decided to leave their countries as "there is nothing but death left there",

and hope to find a better life in Germany or Sweden. One refugee from this group reports that his family house had been hit by an ISIS bomb, killing all of his loved ones. His friend was granted asylum in Germany earlier this year and is now helping him financially. The decision to take the route through Bulgaria was made for financial reasons, as this is indeed less expensive than the route through Greece and Macedonia. The price is approximately 8000 Euros per person from Turkey to Germany. They were advised not to take large amounts of money with them because of the possibility of being robbed by the police. It was useful advice as that is exactly what happened to them. Somewhere near the Serbian border, they were intercepted by the Bulgarian police who extorted money in order not to register and deport them back to Turkey. After bribing the police, they travelled across the mountains for several hours before reaching Dimitrovgrad. Shortly after the registration process, they will go to Belgrade and will pay for the bus ticket afterwards as they do not have any money with them.

Up until three years ago, a 17-year-old refugee from Syria, attended a British school in Aleppo. After his siblings got killed by ISIS, he joined a group of friends and fled to Turkey. However, Turkey was just a stopping point and his final destination is the United Kingdom. He heard about difficulties in Calais but is not afraid. S. tried to cross the border with Bulgaria twice and was pushed back to Turkey. His group managed to enter Bulgaria the third time they tried, and did not have major problems until they arrived near the border with Serbia. They were intercepted by the Bulgarian police, who demanded 450Euros per person in order to avoid registration and deportation. His friend reports to have been physically assaulted by Bulgarian police officer as he did not have any money. S. gave away all of his money and mobile phone and was happy to be able to continue with his journey.

About twenty refugees from different cities in Afghanistan (Kabul, Baghlan, Ghazni) arrived in Dimitrovgrad on 21 October, and are hoping to be in Belgrade by the end of the same day. Their plan is to try to reach Germany and the next stop after Belgrade will be Šid, on the border with Croatia. Their journey was paved with difficulties and adversity. Having been pushed back to Turkey three to five times, some of them had been seriously injured as the police released dogs on them attempting to prevent illegal entry into Bulgaria. They claim to have been robbed by the Bulgarian border police officers right after crossing the border from Turkey the final time, and because they couldn't afford to pay a bribe, they were arrested for illegal border crossing. Upon registration, the group resided in a closed camp where they claim to have been deprived of food and water for three days and constantly physically and psychologically molested by police officers. After spending nearly seven days there, they were released and continued their journey. They managed to avoid the police on the Serbian border.

B. (18) from Aleppo, Syria came to Dimitrovgrad on 21 October. Even though he had expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia he does not plan to stay here any longer than 72 hours. For B., the United Kingdom is the image of a brighter future. He decided to leave Aleppo due to numerous problems with ISIS supporters that escalated when they threatened to kill him if he did not fight for ISIS. Trying to make plans about his journey in Turkey, he decided to travel through Bulgaria due to financial reasons. This was the less expensive path. Shortly after crossing the border from Turkey, they were caught by the border police in Bulgaria who tried to extort money in order not to register them. As they did not have enough money to bribe the police officers, they were taken in Vrazhdebna and registered. B. reports witnessing the police officers registering refugees by force, using physical violence. As soon as they had been released from Vrazhdebna, B. and his group rushed to the border with Serbia. They did not have any problems entering Serbia.

I. (25) and R. (22) left their hometown Nangarhar in Afghanistan two months ago. They were forced to escape due to the persecution and constant fear for life. One of their friends is of Urdu origin and decided to leave Afghanistan to escape origin-based persecution by the Taliban. I. and R. decided to try to reach Germany using the route through Bulgaria due to their fear of water and traveling by boat. They have heard a lot of stories from the other refugees about rubber boats sinking in the Aegean sea. Reaching Turkey was easy for them and hardships occurred when they tried to cross the border with Bulgaria. The Bulgarian police pushed them back to Turkey five times in one week, often using police dogs and physical violence. Some of their friends got seriously injured by the police dogs and had to stay in a hospital in Bulgaria. One of the refugees that were with I. and R. in Dimitrovgrad had visible wounds on his leg that he claims to have acquired when he was bitten by a police dog on the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. This group was not informed about the possibility of seeking asylum in Bulgaria. I. and R. finally succeeded and entered Bulgaria on the sixth time, this time paying 2500 Euros per person to be smuggled across the border. After the police caught them without documents, they had to pay an additional 200 Euros per person in order not to be arrested. Smugglers held them in a forest somewhere near the capital Sofia, feeding them only one piece of bread a day. A few days later, they were transferred near the border with Serbia where they were intercepted by the Bulgarian police once again. This time, police officers shot at them trying to prevent them from escaping, wounding two refugees from their group. I. and R. managed to escape unharmed, they came to Dimitrovgrad and were registered. They are now waiting to be transferred by bus to Belgrade and then to the border with Croatia.

K. (20), a first-year science student, and his two friends arrived to Dimitrovgrad after a long, perilous journey from Kabul, Afghanistan. They knew that it was a life or death situation for

them and that they had to escape. The Taliban began to physically attack K. and his friend daily, leaving horrific wounds on their bodies. As he did not want to join the Taliban in their fight against the Afghani National Army, they kidnapped K.'s family several months ago and he fears that they have been killed. His plan is to try to obtain documents in Belgium and then go back to find out what has happened with his family. K. and his group reported extortion and ill-treatment by the Bulgarian police after crossing the border from Turkey. To avoid deportation, they bribed the police officers with around 1000 Euros and continued with their journey towards Serbia.

A group of seven mostly minor Pashto refugees from Kabul, Afghanistan reported enormous difficulties throughout their journey. Having been attacked by the Taliban and groups affiliated with ISIS, the only way to stay alive was to flee far away from Afghanistan. After spending some time in Turkey, they arrived at the border with Bulgaria on 14 October as part of a larger group of around forty refugees. After crossing the border, they were intercepted by six Bulgarian police officers who used guns and three police dogs in order to push them back to the Turkish side of the border. Seventeen refugees from their group managed to escape, while fifteen got caught and one was shot in the leg. Fearing police brutality, they have been traveling through the woods since, trying to avoid the police. While running away, they separated into several groups and then reunited in Dimitrovgrad. Their destination country is Germany.

A Kurdish group from Kobane, Syria came to Dimitrovgrad on 21 October, after facing severe obstacles on their way. M., a 20-year-old leader of the group, explains how they had been informed by the smugglers not to take the route through Greece as they would be held in the Greek camp for 30 days and then deported back to Turkey. They soon realized that the Bulgarian route was far from safe. M. has spent 2000 Euros from Syria to Bulgaria and an additional 1000 Euros to be transported from Bulgaria to Serbia. Before deciding to use smugglers, M. and his group

were pushed back to Turkey four times, being seriously beaten twice. The smuggling included an hour of transport by car, and after that they were on their own. The police caught them in Sofia. His friends were robbed by the police officers but he managed to preserve some money sewn in his trousers. They were told by the Bulgarian police that they would be held only three days in detention for the purposes of the registration, but instead they spent around two weeks in Vrazhdebna camp. Upon registration, they were released and continued their journey towards Serbia. They got registered once again in Dimitrovgrad and expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia even though they only need the registration paper to continue westwards to their destination country - the United Kingdom.

A., a 17-year-old karateka from Kabul, Afghanistan came to Dimitrovgrad on 22 October, but was not able to continue with his travel towards Germany due to financial difficulties. He is trying to get in contact with a friend who is currently in Turkey, in order to be sent money for the continuing the journey. Ahmad was yet another Afghan refugee who escaped persecution as he did not wanted to fight in an "endless, meaningless war". A member of an ISIS-related group stabbed him with a knife, causing him serious injuries, threatening to kill him if he did not join their forces. His family is still in Afghanistan but he plans to reunite with them once he is granted asylum in Germany. He has spent 3500 Euros in order to arrive to Serbia from Afghanistan, having worked as a construction worker in Iran and Turkey to earn money for his journey. A. is one of the few refugees in Dimitrovgrad who managed to avoid the Bulgarian police and did not report any ill-treatment. He is accompanied by a 19-year-old K. from Kunar whom he have met while trying to reach Serbian territory. K. is also a sportsman, having played cricket for ten years. Their mutual goal unified them. They want to find a better life in Germany. K. also spent around 4000 Euros and worked in Turkey for a while in a cable factory in order to save money for the continuation of

his travel towards Germany. K. travelled as a part of another group of refugees, but they were separated after crossing the border from Turkey to Bulgaria. The police intercepted them and tried to extort money in order to avoid registration and deportation, but since they did not have any money, the police officers physically assaulted them. Five of K.'s friends were detained, and he was the only one to escape. A. and K. are not going to Belgrade together with other refugees standing in front of the police station in Dimitrovgrad as they did not have 25 euros to buy the bus ticket.

Six refugees, members of the Pashto tribe Zadran from Kabul, fled Afghanistan due to brutal war and constant threats by various extremist groups, such as ISIS, the Taliban, and other groups affiliated with them. S. (24) decided to leave before something bad happened to him. He chose the route through Bulgaria due to his fear of water and inability to swim. Having crossing the border between Turkey and Bulgaria, his group experienced ill-treatment by the Bulgarian police. As they did not want to bribe the police officers, they were physically assaulted and beaten with police batons. After beating them, the police officers robbed them, taking their money and mobile phones. S. managed to hide a small amount of money and used it to come to Serbia. His goal is Western Europe and he hopes to reunite with his family later. R. (17) is part of another group of Pashto refugees from the Laghman province in Afghanistan. He arrived to Dimitrovgrad after a two-month journey through Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria. R. went to school in Laghman, but he explains that it was just a formality and that they did not learn anything. "It is hard to be young boy in Afghanistan, they make you choose either you are a Taliban or Arbaki", says Roshan, adding that he did not wanted to join any of those groups. Fighting means death and he wanted to stay alive. He does not know where he is headed yet, but has a friend in Germany from whom he expects assistance. R. paid 1500 Dollars in order to reach Turkey, where he worked

in Istanbul for 6 months to earn money to continue westwards. He met a smuggling group there and arranged to be transferred to Serbia for 1200 Euros. He and his group spent three days and three nights on the border between Turkey and Bulgaria walking through the woods in harsh weather conditions in order to meet the people who were going to transfer them through Bulgaria. As they got intercepted by the border police, robbed and physically assaulted, smugglers abandoned them and they continued their journey on their own. After crossing the border with Serbia, they came to the police station in order to get registered so as to be able to travel towards the Croatian border.

Recommendations

The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights has the following recommendations for the Bulgarian authorities

1. The Bulgarian authorities should conduct a proper and independent investigation concerning refugees' allegations of ill-treatment at the hands of Bulgarian law enforcement personnel;
2. The Bulgarian authorities should publicly condemn the alleged acts of ill-treatment of refugees and other categories of migrants and should emphasize that these cases will be properly investigated and sanctioned;
3. The Bulgarian Ombudsman should be more involved in the monitoring of the status of refugees and other categories of migrants in Bulgaria;
4. The National Preventive Mechanism against Torture should increase its presence in the border zones, as well as in the asylum and detention centres, to enable refugees and other categories of migrants to report cases of ill-treatment;
5. The capacity of civil society organizations providing free legal aid to refugees and other categories of migrants should be further strengthened, including an increased presence in the border zones (border monitoring), so that refugees and other categories of migrants have access to proper counselling and representation in the event of ill-treatment occurring.