UNHCR
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

PROTECTION BRIEF
BULGARIA

MIXED AND ONWARD MOVEMENTS

MAY 2025

Children studying in a Harmanli school © UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov Around 80 per cent of unaccompanied and separated children disappear, likely moving onward.

Operational Context

By a decision of the European Council on 4 December 2024, Bulgaria fully acceded to the Schengen zone as an EU Member State positioned on its external borders, lifting internal land borders with Romania. The evolving political and socio-economic landscape in Bulgaria, with a coalition government established in in January 2025, poses challenges for asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In 2024, Bulgaria received 12,250 applications for asylum compared to 22,518 in 2023, representing a 45.6% decrease. The largest group of asylum-seekers were Syrian nationals (7,646 or 62.42%) followed by Afghanistan and Morocco. Pushback practices, which involve forcing asylum-seekers to return to another country without considering their protection needs, remain an important concern. While Bulgaria reported almost 180,000 instances of prevented entry through its borders in 2023, this was slightly more than 55,000 in 2024, representing 69.35% decrease. This coincides with a 78% decrease in the number of persons involved in mixed movements in the Western Balkan route, primarily through Greece.[1]

In this context, to better understand the profiles, needs and experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and others involved in mixed movements, UNHCR Bulgaria and its partner Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) have participated in the Regional Protection Monitoring through 2024.[2] From February to December 2024, 1,756 interviews were conducted in Bulgaria, mainly in reception and detention centres. This brief presents the main findings of these interviews.

Key figures

72.4%
reported leaving their country of origin due to generalized violence and insecurity, threats or discrimination.

573
had previously been prevented from entering Bulgaria, with 7% subjected to some form of violence or mistreatment in the process.

97%
have applied for asylum in Bulgaria, with 93% informed about their right to seek asylum in the country of interview in a language they understand

89%
of respondents were provided with legal counseling/ information in the country of interview

58%
of respondents do not have documentation

5%
were previously recognized as refugees before entering Bulgaria

79%
were willing to stay permanently in Bulgaria at the time of the interview

80%
were working in their country of origin

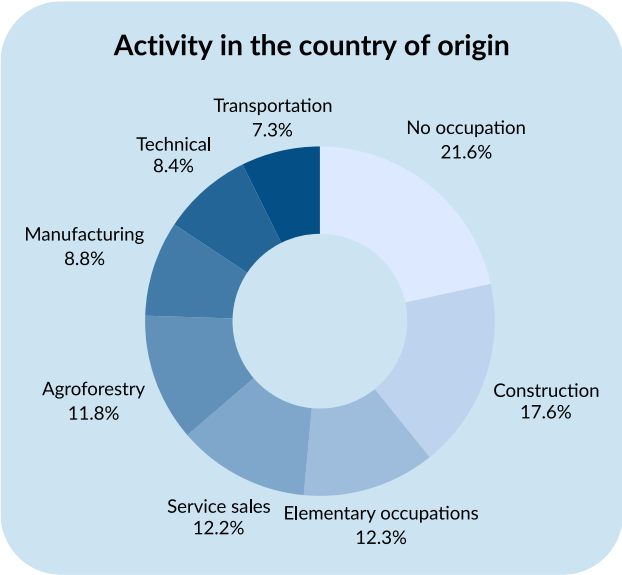
[1] Frontex, Irregular border crossings into EU drop sharply in 2024, January 2025.
[2] UNHCR, Mixed Movements in South Eastern Europe, December 2024.

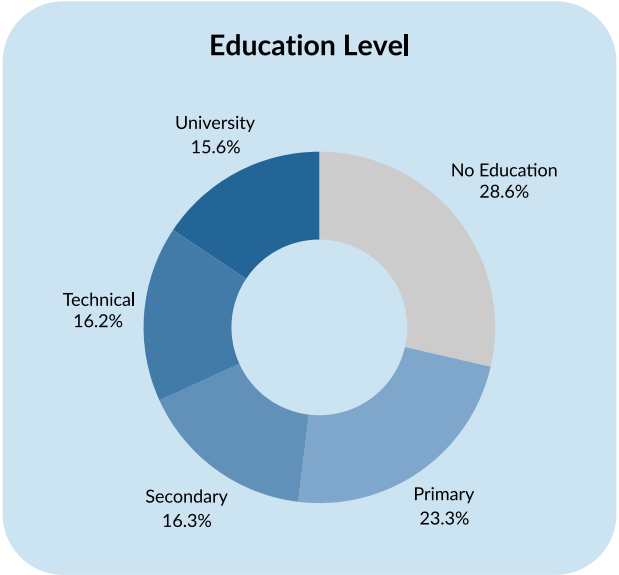
Demographic profile

88%
of respondents are men

10%
of respondents are women and girls

2%
of respondents are boys



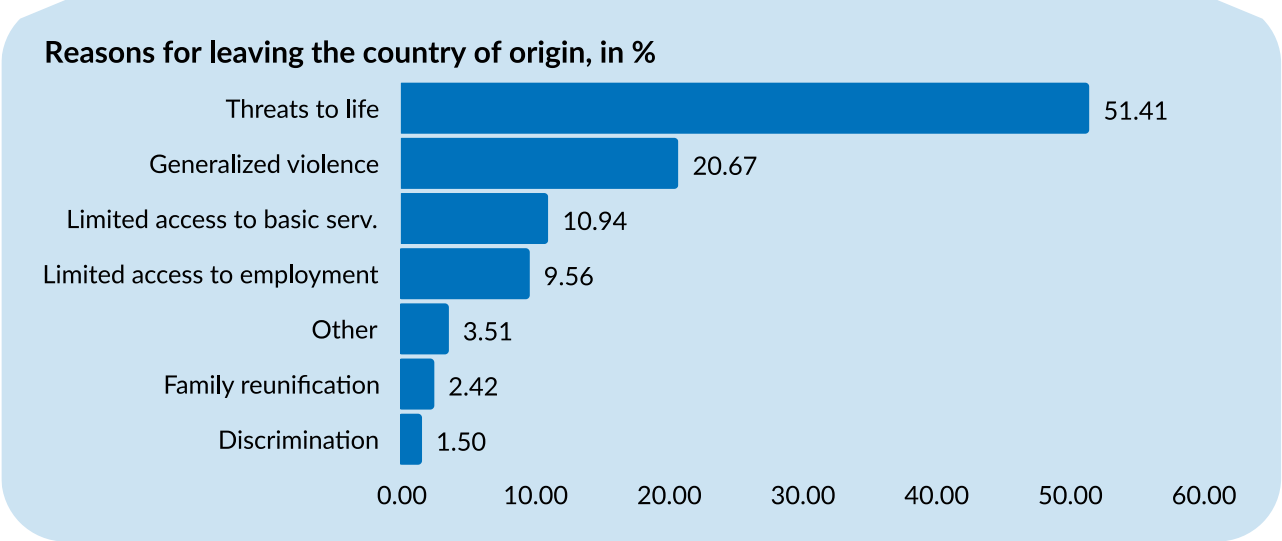


Protection Challenges Along the Route

Among those interviewed, 13% mentioned that they had previously been prevented from entering Bulgaria on at least one occasion, and 7% of respondents experiencing some form of violence or mistreatment in the process. Of the 13% prevented from entering Bulgaria without consideration of their international protection needs, 50% experienced several pushbacks, with a maximum number of 12 attempts to enter Bulgaria. 35% experienced prevention of movement in the previous country while attempting to enter Bulgaria. Based on the monitoring of borders and interviews with asylum seekers in detention, this included persons who were pushed back to Serbia from other EU Member States and then deported to Bulgaria.

In many instances, denial of entry is carried out without legal and procedural safeguards and not following procedures aimed at identifying asylum-seekers and persons with specific needs. This is notable among populations with a higher likelihood of needing international protection (see below).

Movement Patterns and Access to Asylum



Most respondents (72.4%) reported that they were forced to flee their country of origin due to insecurity, threats to their life, and discrimination. This was true for almost 85% of the Syrian respondents, with the rest referring to family reunification in Bulgaria or in another EU country (3%), and lack of access to basic services and limited employment opportunities (10%) as their top reason for their journey.

92% of the respondents were informed about their right to apply for asylum in Bulgaria by the time of the interview. 89% of the respondents had access to legal counseling and assistance, which was provided by UNHCR partners and other civil society actors. In the case of unaccompanied children, they received legal assistance from Bulgarian Helsinki Committee under UNHCR partnership to access the procedures, including from detention facilities, and have received state-provided free legal aid and representation in the course of their asylum procedures by the National Bureau for Legal Aid.

97% of respondents reported applying for asylum in Bulgaria, with 70% waiting for a decision at the time of the interview, 18% reported being granted international protection, mostly subsidiary protection. And the remaining 12% of individuals who reported applying for asylum stated that their applications were rejected. Of those interviewed, 3% reported not applying for asylum, largely due to unawareness of the application process (64%), plans to move elsewhere and not needing asylum (8%).

Drivers of Onward Movements

79% of the respondents stated that they are willing to permanently stay in Bulgaria, if theyare granted legal status and assisted with family reunification. This finding suggests that Bulgaria is not merely a transit country from the perspective of asylum-seekers. According to a participatory assessment UNHCR conducted in 2023, 47% of respondents stated that they would like to establish their lives in Bulgaria until they can return to safety in their countries of origin. These findings suggest that poor reception conditions,[3] including administrative barriers to accessing essential services such as health care and education, as well as limited opportunities for employment and incomes that do not support decent living conditions, are among the primary motivators of onward movements.

For instance, without a valid identity document, recognized refugees are not able to open bank accounts, which in turn prevents their employment in the formal labour market. Refugees have limited access to social protection due to legal and administrative barriers, which often requires litigation before an administrative court to overturn the decision rejecting their application with the Agency for Social Assistance. 76% of the respondents in the 2024 protection monitoring interviews were accommodated in the reception centres at the time of the interview. While 98% of the respondents had access to basic health care provided in these centres, 48% felt very safe and only 28% had food three times a day.

In focus - Syria: 62% of Syrian nationals reported that they were displaced from their country due to threats to their lives, while slightly more than 26% reported generalized violence and discrimination being the main reason for their displacement. 9% attributed their decision to leave Syria due to lack of access to basic services and 3% to seeking family reunification. 82,5% of the Syrian respondents were educated. 86% of Syrian respondents were willing to stay in Bulgaria until they can return to safety, provided they have access to assistance, for instance education and employment, while only 6% intended to move onwards to another country. 96% of Syrian respondents applied for asylum in Bulgaria. Almost 3 per cent of respondents from Syrian were children. In 2024, there were 1,448 unaccompanied children from Syria applying for international protection in Bulgaria within the year, with a refugee recognition rate of 0,3 per cent, and humanitarian status rate of 57 per cent (166 unaccompanied children granted international protection, with 124 being rejected). Exacerbated by adverse reception conditions such as limited access to the national child protection system and social care, limited education and personal development opportunities, and lack of integration prospects, the factors underlying onward movements to other EU countries is particularly concerning for unaccompanied children, exposing them to the risk of abuse and exploitation, including trafficking.

[3] See also: The Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, Report of the National Preventive Mechanism on inspections carried out in structures of the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for Refugees, January 2024 (only available in BG).

1,281 unaccompanied children from Syria absconded while their asylum applications were pending, and had their asylum procedures terminated in 2024.

In focus - Afghanistan: The majority of Afghan nationals (98.5%) reported they were forced to flee because of insecurity, threats to their life, or discrimination. Only 10% of the Afghan respondents did not consider Bulgaria as a potential country where they can seek protection and establish lives until they can safely return to Afghanistan at the time of the interview. However, UNHCR observes that very low recognition rates in Bulgaria (10% of those staying in Bulgarian until the end of their procedures, compared to 47% EU average) contribute to the propensity of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees to move onwards to other EU countries. In 2024, 1,969 Afghan nationals absconded while their asylum application was pending, including 625 unaccompanied children, whose cases were terminated.

Calls to Action

UNHCR recommends the Government of Bulgaria to:

- Introduce protection-sensitive entry and admission procedures. Ensure that vulnerable persons are identified and referred to the protection systems and procedures, in particular unaccompanied children, women at risk, persons with disabilities, victims of trafficking, people undergoing trauma, and stateless persons. Swift screening and admission of persons wishing to claim international protection is necessary to ensure effective access to asylum procedures in line with international and European law.
- Scale up efforts to establish an independent national monitoring mechanism to ensure that Bulgaria's human rights obligations are consistently upheld in managing its borders and allegations of misconduct are investigated. UNHCR has presented its recommendations on such a mechanism in the context of the national implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.
- Promote the inclusion of international protection beneficiaries in the national protection systems and essential services and ensuring their integration in line with the requirements of the Common European Asylum System, including facilitating access to livelihood opportunities, language courses, and promoting social cohesion. Such an approach, in line with Bulgaria's commitments, can mitigate the protection risks of onward movement and its impact on the EU protection and migration systems.
- Establish legal pathways for safe and orderly movement of forcibly displaced and stateless persons, including resettlement and measures to ensure the viability and accessibility of regular pathways, such as family reunification, education pathways, and labour mobility opportunities.

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