

BULGARIA

Syrian refugees left to fend for themselves in Bulgaria

Since December 2013, people fleeing war and persecution and granted international protection in Bulgaria have not received [any initial integration support](#). They have no access to accommodation, language or vocational training and many are unsure of what the future holds for them.

Syrian refugee Yasmin, a mother of two whose experience was [captured by the Guardian in a poignant documentary](#) told the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) in April 2014 that she is still separated from her husband Tariq, who had been pushed back from Bulgaria to Turkey several times. As a recognized refugee, she was permitted to stay for an additional six months in the Harmanli reception centre after her recognition of her status. But with time quickly running out and without any close prospect for integration support, Yasmin told the BHC that she is extremely worried about where to go and how to provide for her children, including her newborn baby.



Although the Bulgarian government announced they were working towards the establishment of a new integration program involving local municipalities, so far only a [National Integration Strategy 2014-2020](#) which does not foresee any concrete measures has been adopted. The stagnation is partly due to political unrest in the country following a year of mass street protests resulting in the government officially resigning in July. The lack of any annual integration program in place forced many refugees to leave the country and head to Western Europe.

Despite repeated warnings by NGOs that Bulgaria should increase its reception capacity to be able to host the Syrian refugees that would be arriving from Turkey, [the nearly 10,000 refugees](#) who arrived in Bulgaria from January to October 2013 (not all of whom were officially registered in 2013) caught the country unprepared, leading to a complete institutional collapse. Asylum seekers were placed in derelict buildings with no heating or access to medical care. The facilities sometimes lacked any administration or dedicated personnel and there was no specific care provided for children.

The dismal conditions forced a large number of asylum seekers to declare they would be relying on alternative accommodation in order to leave the reception centres, thus giving up their right to accommodation and social assistance, as warranted by law. Between December 2013 and March 2014, the registration and documentation of asylum seekers was officially and repeatedly postponed from three up to six months. Being undocumented, without any access to accommodation, social assistance, medical care or any other support services and having their status determination postponed for months, many of these asylum seekers opted to leave Bulgaria and seek protection elsewhere.

Four new reception centres opened in September and October 2013 and by the end of April 2014, Bulgaria had secured a total of 6,000 places. NGOs who have visited the centres say that conditions have improved considerably. All new centres have undergone repairs and refurbishment since December 2013. The government also now provides for nutrition, medical and social assistance. The centre in Harmanli, which was of particular concern, no longer operates under a closed regime.

Until March 2014, the national asylum system struggled to overcome the lack of adequate or even basic reception conditions. While there have been considerable improvements over the last months regarding reception of asylum seekers, concerns regarding accommodation and integration of recognized refugees remain. ■ ■

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