

(Im)possible migration and the double game of asylum in Bulgaria

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Abstract

In Bulgaria, those seeking international protection move within a field shaped by border enforcement, legal frameworks and institutional control. Drawing on twenty-nine focus groups with 279 participants and non-participant observation conducted between 2014 and 2016 in reception centres run by the State Agency for Refugees and in detention facilities under the Ministry of the Interior, this article proposes the concept of “(im)possible migration”: a condition in which movement continues but cannot reach a place where the migration project can be realised. The analysis follows this condition along two dimensions – at the external border, where space closes, and within the status-determination procedure, where time stretches until it is lived as lost. Reading the encounter between institutional rules and people’s strategies through Bourdieu’s notion of the double game, the article argues that the category of “asylum seeker” is not merely a legal label but a symbolic boundary sustained by the state’s power to classify, one that people do not simply endure but use in pursuing their own projects. Read from Bulgaria, these practices appear as an early instance of logics that later became general across the Union.

Keywords: Bulgaria; asylum; (im)possible migration; double game; Dublin Regulation.

Introduction

“What is Bulgaria’s problem? It won’t let us leave, and it won’t give us papers either?”¹ The question, put to me by a woman from Tunisia, formulates the problem this article addresses. It points to the particular spatial and temporal organisation of the lives of those seeking international protection. They are, metaphorically and literally, locked within a dense web of borders, rules and institutionally controlled spaces. Free movement is restricted, reduced to a country, a town, an institution or a room. In parallel, time stretches until it comes to be lived as ‘lost life’ and ‘empty time’. A comparable dynamic has been observed by other researchers of forced migration. Carolina Kobelinsky (2021, 129) describes a similar process in French reception centres for asylum seekers and formulates it as a contraction of space and an expansion of time. In her study, the space that contracts is that of the reception institution. The material from the present study shows that the same process can extend to

¹ Focus group with Arabic-speaking women seeking protection, SAR reception centre, Sofia, September 2014.

the state as a whole: in countries such as Bulgaria, situated on the external border of the EU, the national territory becomes, for those seeking protection and often for recognised refugees as well, a space of enforced stay from which there is no lawfully recognised exit.

I call this condition *(im)possible migration*. Within it, people's movement continues: they are transferred from one institutional space to another, pass through different statuses within the status-determination procedure, and often leave the country by what is termed 'illegal' means. What is impossible in this sense is not movement itself, but arrival at a place where the migration project can be realised.² The parentheses mark this divergence between movement that continues and its inability to follow the biographical direction it was meant to take. Here lies the principal difference from the notions of *immobility* and *stuckness* – a distinction I develop below. The condition affects not only those seeking protection but also those who have obtained it. Refugee and humanitarian status confer rights whose legal force is confined to the state that granted the protection. They do not, however, confer a right to settle or work in another EU country, and in this way they consolidate the impossibility of migration.

The trajectory of one of my interlocutors shows how this (im)possibility unfolds. A 48-year-old man from Syria arrived in Bulgaria in September 2014 and was granted humanitarian status four months later. He then travelled to Denmark, where he lodged a fresh application, which the authorities rejected. From Denmark he moved on to Germany, where his application remained unresolved for fifteen months. He returned to Bulgaria because it was the only state in which he could apply to be reunited with his wife and two children, who had remained in Lebanon. His movement across several states did not cease, yet it brought him no closer to the migration project that had set it in motion – bringing his family together in safety. The divergence between people's migration strategies and what the legal regime renders (im)possible is equally apparent at the outset of these trajectories. For many of my interlocutors, Bulgaria was not the final destination of their journey but a country to be crossed on a route whose end lay elsewhere. Apprehended on the territory, they faced return to Turkey or deprivation of liberty for irregular crossing of the external border. From that point onwards, the possibilities for realising the migration project were restructured by the European asylum regime and by the procedure the person entered.

The people I worked with did not simply find themselves within this system of constraints; they oriented themselves within it and acted according to the possibilities it left open. Sometimes the knowledge of how to act in particular situations came through the experience of others and through migrant networks; at other times it was acquired on the spot, on entering the procedure itself. Many had learned that irregular entry carries no criminal liability where a person identifies themselves to the authorities as seeking protection, and that once lodged, an application obliges the state to examine it. When apprehended after attempting to transit, they made use of this procedural possibility. The rule does not bind only the person to the state; it binds the state to the person in turn: once an application is lodged, the institutions are obliged to register it, to examine it, and to rule on it. It was from this reciprocity that the move drew its force. Lodging an application was the only lawful way of remaining in the country; it halted return, while at the same time binding the person to the state they had intended only to cross. It is precisely this possibility of acting within the rules and through them that lies at the heart of what Bourdieu (1993, 68) calls the double

² By migration project I refer to the intended trajectory through which people seek to realise particular life goals by moving across borders – not only the destination but the route, its duration, and the future they imagine, all of which may change.

game – playing by the rules of the game to the very limit, breaking the rule by the rule. The concept allows the actions of those seeking protection to be seen not merely as a reaction to institutional constraints, but as moves made within the rules and through them.

This perspective remains comparatively undeveloped in the Bulgarian literature. The institutional dynamics of status determination, and how people live through the procedure, have received limited attention. Existing anthropological and sociological work on forced migration in Bulgaria has nonetheless brought to light important dimensions of the process: transformations of social and gender roles and the incorporation of refugees into the labour market (Cholakova 2006), ties to the homeland and the maintenance of identity, as well as the social production of various figures of the refugee (Krasteva 2006), and relations with the receiving community.³ This work largely concerns people who have already obtained status. The distinction between ‘economic migrants’ and refugees has been interrogated as produced rather than given – a result of historical and political processes rather than a point of departure (Apostolova 2024). Conditions in the reception centres have been documented in detail (Hristova et al. 2014). Academic research on the governance of the reception system remains limited, and much of what is known derives from reports produced by non-governmental organisations (Otova and Staykova 2019). These accounts consistently describe a restrictive system. That restrictiveness, however, is not an exception to the European norm but an instance of it – a logic embedded in the Common European Asylum System, whose tension between human rights protection and internal security legitimises the narrowing of protection (Nancheva 2015), and one in which the national and supranational levels of asylum governance prove inseparably intertwined (Nancheva 2016). This article situates itself within that debate but shifts the focus towards the procedure itself as a field of play.

I argue that the category of *asylum seeker*, besides being a normatively defined legal status, is a symbolic boundary sustained by the state’s power to classify – one that people in situations of forced migration do not simply endure but use in pursuing their migration projects, through actions that institutions and society come to define as ‘criminal’ and ‘illegal’. Seen from this vantage point, the Bulgarian case is not a peripheral variant of European migration governance but one of its early instances: practices that spread across the Union after 2015 were already in place here between 2013 and 2015 (Apostolova 2016). The analysis draws on 29 focus groups conducted between 2014 and 2016 in reception centres and detention facilities across Bulgaria. It follows the condition along its two dimensions: at the external border, where space closes, and within the procedure, where time stretches.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

I examine the problems addressed in this article through Bourdieu’s concepts of the double game, introduced above, and of symbolic struggles within the field of the nation-state. For Bourdieu, symbolic struggles include strategies of self-presentation through which actors manipulate their image and, in particular, their position in social space. By *field* I refer to any social space in which habitus operates and social games are played out – a site of negotiation, renegotiation, and the breach of rules, in which processes of governance, power, and legitimate authority are encoded. *Habitus* is what impels individuals towards particular strategies of action. It is a practical sense – not conscious knowledge of the rules but a feel for what is appropriate, a capacity to play the game, and to improvise towards a successful

³ Hristova, Tsvetelina. 2013. *Solidarnost, konflikti, transformatsii: promeni i vzaimodeystviya v selo Pastrogor sled postroyavaneto na Tranzitniya tsentar za bezhantsi*. Unpublished MA thesis. Sofia: Sofiyski universitet Sv. Kliment Ohridski.

move (Deyanova and Deyanov 1993, V). *Capital*, in turn, is what drives the field. Strategies of play, produced when habitus meets a particular conjuncture of the field, depend on the capital each agent or institution commands. Two forms of capital are decisive for what follows; a third, the state's meta-capital, is introduced below. *Symbolic capital* is not a further species of capital but any capital insofar as it is recognised as such and holds public legitimacy: it appears in the recognised legal status that asylum seekers mobilise vis-à-vis institutions, in the self-presentation as a victim that border regimes reward, and in the standing that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) confers on those who act in its name. *Social capital*, the relations that ordinary language calls 'connections', appears in the kin and friendship networks located in other national fields, towards which trajectories are oriented and which cannot be reached by legal means. For capital to be effective, it must be recognised and valued by other agents, and it operates across the different fields of play (Deyanova and Deyanov 1993, V).

These games are played on unequal terms. In Weber's (1993) classic account, the state claims a monopoly over legitimate physical violence within a given territory. Bourdieu (1997) extends this insight from physical to symbolic power: the modern state holds the monopoly over legitimate *symbolic* violence, the power to impose the categories through which the social world is perceived and divided. This monopoly extends to the European context, exercised by both nation-states and EU institutions within a common legal framework that often takes precedence over national law.

At the same time, I analyse how forced migrants develop strategies to act within and around forms of legitimate domination – practices labelled by institutions and their staff as 'illegal', yet embedded in coherent logics of survival and biographical projects. I approach law as a framework that sets the conditions but does not predetermine what effect those conditions will have on particular people. These effects are produced in practice – through the way institutions apply the rules, and through the way people try to act within these frameworks from a position of significantly smaller capital and limited capacity to change them.

The 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the Common European Asylum System, and the Dublin Regulation set out the categories and procedures that govern the field of forced migration. The Bulgarian institutions represented in this study cannot act outside this common framework. Yet, the material suggests that officials in different institutional positions retain considerable latitude in how they apply its rules. The law sets a framework intended to regulate migration, yet leaves those whose projects lie beyond Bulgaria in a position where the only route towards them runs through practices defined as 'illegal'. It is in how the institutions inhabit that framework that the state's double game becomes visible. The formal requirements of the regulatory framework (registering applications, conducting interviews, and issuing a decision on a given case) are met. But, in practice, and as experienced by the people whose accounts are analysed here, the duration of the procedure, refusals, and appeals function as mechanisms through which migration is governed. Through them, state actors produce effects on migrants' lives that exceed the formal application of the law, shaping their capacity to move, to build plans for the future, and to realise their biographical projects. As Andersson (2014) shows, the drawing-out of the procedure can function as a form of deterrence. What the state holds, and what institutional actors exercise on its behalf, can be understood as a form of meta-capital: the capacity to impose legitimate classifications that determine who is recognised as an 'asylum seeker' and

who is classified as an ‘irregular’ migrant, and thereby to establish the conditions under which other forms of capital within the field can be recognised, mobilised, and converted.⁴

In line with the critical analyses of Casas-Cortés et al. (2015) and De Genova (2013), the Dublin Regulation and the broader European asylum system can be understood as mechanisms that generate legal instability and hypermobility, operating in the tension between migrants’ efforts to move and organise their lives in Europe and the drive of EU institutions and nation-states to govern that movement. Illegality, in this sense, is generated by the policies and practices of nation-states and the EU: through laws that define how the external border may be crossed, through the categories by which the administration sorts people, and through the practices that put those categories into effect (see Schuster 2011; De Genova 2013; Brekke and Brochmann 2015). Underlying this literature is the argument, developed by De Genova from Foucault, that power does not merely regulate pre-existing subjects but actively constitutes the categories through which they become governable. From a Bourdieusian perspective, illegality is not only imposed from without: it becomes a stake within a field, a space of unequal positions in which agents, endowed with different forms of capital, play through the rules and within them. The two accounts do not compete. A Foucauldian lens accounts for how this condition is produced; Bourdieu’s approach makes it possible to grasp which capitals the field mobilises and which games and strategies it renders possible.

A body of anthropological research has traced how this illegality is inhabited – as a mode of being that structures migrants’ experience of time and space, their own bodies (Willen 2005, 66–67) and reorders the boundary between the ‘included’ and the ‘excluded’ (Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Abraham and van Schendel 2005; Schrover et al. 2008). Building on this work, this article shifts the analytical focus to the asylum procedure itself as a social field (De Genova 2013; Andersson 2014; Tazzioli 2018; Rotter 2016). Where Andersson follows people along a border route, I followed the procedure across the sites through which it is administered – which shows it to be not an interval between movements but the site where the play itself unfolds. Such a perspective makes visible how legal rules become strategic resources that actors occupying unequal positions mobilise in different ways. Seen in this way, the condition named above emerges as relational – produced through these interactions rather than imposed by either side.

The notion of (im)possible migration developed here is in dialogue with, but distinct from, existing scholarship on (im)mobility. Conlon (2011) has theorised the tension between movement and stasis as a gendered and embodied experience, showing how immobility is not simply the absence of movement but a politically produced condition. Similarly, Brekke and Brochmann (2015) have examined how asylum seekers become “stuck in transit” within the Dublin system. While these contributions illuminate constrained mobility as a politically produced condition, (im)possible migration foregrounds a different emphasis. What scholarship on stuckness and (im)mobility captures as suspension or enforced stasis, I approach as a field of play in which those held in place do not merely endure waiting but actively navigate it, mobilising the limited capital available to them. The concept thus retains the insight that immobility is produced rather than natural, while shifting attention from the condition itself to the unequal play through which it is sustained and contested. Tazzioli’s

⁴ The notion of meta-capital is developed from Bourdieu’s account of the state’s monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence and is used here in an extended sense, to designate the state’s capacity to impose classifications and to regulate the conditions under which different forms of capital are recognised and converted across the fields in which they acquire their value (see Bourdieu 1997).

(2018, 18) analysis of temporal borders identifies the techniques through which the EU border regime governs movement by regulating time through acceleration and suspension. My concern here is adjacent but analytically distinct. Where temporal borders name an instrument of governance, (im)possible migration designates the condition that emerges when that instrument meets the strategies of the people at whom it is directed – the play produced in that encounter.

The impossibility at stake here is not only that of settling. Movement persists throughout, but its legal standing shifts along the way: each onward step towards a desired future is liable to be recast as an offence. What is impossible is neither movement nor settlement taken separately, but their conversion into an outcome in which the migration project becomes realisable. The condition is therefore legible across the trajectory rather than at any single point in it. These movements are strategies in Bourdieu's sense, shaped by the possibilities and constraints of the field, rather than reducible to either compliance with or violation of its rules.

Analytically, the condition becomes visible through a recurring set of practices: at the border, through the non-admission and pushback of people attempting to enter; during the asylum procedure, through delays, prolonged waiting, and the criminalisation of irregular exit while an application is pending; after protection is granted, through the confinement of long-term residence and access to employment to the state that granted protection, while short-term travel elsewhere in the EU remains the only lawful form of movement. Deterrence thus operates along two interconnected dimensions: spatially, by blocking entry and binding people to the territory of obligation, and temporally, by managing and prolonging the time of the procedure. These institutional practices are themselves exercises of the state's *meta-capital*: each of them turns on the power to classify a movement as legitimate or as an offence. On the side of those bound by these practices, the condition becomes visible through an application lodged after apprehension rather than before it, the recognised legal status mobilised as symbolic capital vis-à-vis institutions, kin and friendship networks activated as social capital located in other national fields, and repeated attempts to leave. It is their interplay, rather than any single practice, that marks the condition.

Because this binding derives from the common European framework rather than from any national context, comparable situations are likely at the Union's other external borders. Nor is the reach of the concept exhausted by border control. The same logic, a legal regime that ties a person to a place while thwarting the life project pursued there, recurs wherever that tie holds: within the asylum procedure, where waiting extends over months or years without a decision; in returns under the Dublin Regulation; and after refugee status has been granted in Bulgaria, since it does not in itself permit lawful labour migration or other forms of onward movement.⁵ A systematic examination of these settings would require research in each of them and lies beyond the present analysis.

Methods and fieldwork

The material presented in this article was generated primarily through focus groups conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2016, as part of a broader ethnographic study carried out between 2013 and 2017. The fieldwork also included visits to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), informal conversations and life-history narratives, as well as encounters with representatives of non-governmental and human-rights organisations, border-police officers,

⁵ This holds beyond the long-term residence route under Directive 2011/51/EU, which none of my interlocutors was in a position to pursue.

and Ministry of the Interior staff, among others. My interpretation was shaped by the fieldwork as a whole, including these encounters and informal conversations that took place after the sessions and during overnight field visits. State representatives encountered during fieldwork were aware of my role as a researcher, but these interactions were not formal interviews and no separate consent was sought. Where their statements appear in the analysis, they are included as illustrations of discourses encountered during fieldwork rather than as a systematic source of institutional perspectives.

My work with people seeking international protection began in 2013 as a volunteer at the Integration Centre of the SAR, teaching Bulgarian to children and unaccompanied minors still in the procedure, for whom licensed language courses were unavailable. This volunteer work provided my first sustained access to a field otherwise mediated by institutional gatekeepers, while also reminding me that such access was itself institutionally mediated. The empirical material was collected as part of a study coordinated by the UNHCR in Bulgaria, which I joined as a volunteer member of the research team in mid-2014. The study followed UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity participatory assessment methodology, whose aim is to include as broad and varied a range of persons of concern as possible and, through their accounts, to inform protection monitoring and advocacy. Its purpose was thus distinct from my own: the present analysis reworks the material generated in that setting towards a different question, that of my doctoral research. Within the multi-functional teams conducting the focus groups, my role was primarily observational. I documented participants' responses and followed the structured interview protocol, while rarely intervening in the discussions beyond the questions included in the interview guide. Consequently, the material analysed here consists primarily of what participants chose to share within the sessions. Although I was introduced to participants as a doctoral candidate in social anthropology, the distinction between my individual role and the broader institutional framework of the UNHCR-coordinated study was not always explicit. For many interlocutors, the research team was perceived simply as "the people from the UN", expected to act as potential protectors or intermediaries within the asylum system: "You are human rights defenders, where are our rights?"; "You are from the UN, you must protect us." The UNHCR itself decides individual claims to refugee status in several countries, and the symbolic capital this confers was part of what participants addressed when they spoke to us. This institutional context formed part of the conditions under which the empirical material was collected. I assume that, in some cases, participants' accounts were shaped by the expectation that UNHCR might contribute to a favourable outcome in their cases, and I therefore read them as part of the institutional interactions in which they were participating. My institutional position was at once a condition of access to the field and a limit on interpretation: the accounts would probably have sounded different to another listener, though these differences cannot be established retrospectively.

The study comprised 29 focus group interviews conducted in the transit and reception centres of the SAR in Sofia (the Ovcha Kupel, Voenna Rampa, and Vrazhdebna districts) and the town of Harmanli and the village of Pastrogor, as well as in the Special Homes for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SHAF) in Busmantsi (Sofia) and Lyubimets, administered by the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior. The analysis draws on purposively selected narratives from participants whose migration trajectories were shaped by prolonged asylum procedures, negative decisions, or the inability to continue towards their intended destinations. Participants were recruited voluntarily by centre or facility staff from among the persons accommodated there at the time of each session, rather

than through formal random sampling. The 29 groups involved 279 participants in total (68 in 2014, 131 in 2015, and 80 in 2016), ranging from three to sixteen people per session. The focus groups were organised by sex, by the language of participants (principally Arabic, Farsi, and English), and by legal status, distinguishing asylum seekers from those already granted refugee or humanitarian status. Separate groups were held for unaccompanied minors, accompanied by a social worker from the SAR. I took part in the Arabic, Farsi, and English language groups.

The methods used were qualitative: structured focus group interviews, supplemented by unstructured conversations; non-participant observation of everyday interactions and spaces in the SAR reception centres and the SHAFs. Interviews were conducted with the assistance of interpreters, working principally from Arabic and Farsi according to the language spoken by participants. All relevant institutions and stakeholders were informed of the research, which was approved by UNHCR and by my university and followed established ethical standards for research involving people seeking international protection, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and the alteration of identifying details (including names and biographical characteristics).

The analysis does not seek to reconstruct how institutional actors understood or intended these practices. It examines instead how institutional rules and practices were experienced by people seeking international protection, and how their effects emerged in the encounters between migrants and institutions. The double game is therefore read from its effects, not from the intentions of those who take part in it.

Context: asylum procedure and mobility in Bulgaria

The period 2013–2017 was a time of intense change and institutional reorganisation within the system of international protection in Bulgaria. After a decade during which around 1,000 people per year sought protection, in 2013 the number of applications reached 7,144, with approximately 63 per cent submitted by Syrian nationals – a scale that exceeded the existing capacity of the system to accommodate applicants and conduct status determination procedures (UNHCR 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014). This increase prompted a series of institutional responses: the expansion of reception facilities, changes in procedural practices, the construction of a fence along the border with Turkey, systematic pushbacks, and prolonged detention. Framed at the time as a temporary response to an exceptional situation, these interventions have since become enduring features of the Bulgarian asylum regime. Apostolova (2016, 38) has argued that the fence, the returns at the border and the prolonged detention were already operating here between 2013 and 2015, before comparable measures spread across the Union. While 2015 is widely recognised as a significant turning point in European discussions of the so-called ‘migration crisis’, the Bulgarian case highlights an earlier moment of transformation, beginning in 2013. The ‘crisis’ framing has itself been critiqued as a political construction rather than a neutral description: Apostolova (2016, 34) argues that the crisis was equally one of liberal definitions of violence and of who has the right to escape it – a distinction institutionalised at Europe’s external borders through the separation of ‘genuine refugees’ from ‘economic migrants’.

The system of international protection in Bulgaria is organised along two main institutional lines. On one hand, the SAR manages transit and reception centres and is responsible for granting or refusing refugee or humanitarian status. On the other hand, there is the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior, which administers the SHAFs. In the life trajectories of asylum seekers, the status determination procedure and administrative detention often intersect: the same people may pass through an SHAF and then be

transferred to a SAR centre (or vice versa) multiple times. The status-determination procedure includes the submission of an application, registration, an interview, and a decision, which may grant refugee status, humanitarian status, or refuse protection. During my fieldwork, this meant that applicants had no lawful possibility of leaving the country for the entire duration of the procedure. At the same time, access to the labour market was made conditional on a waiting period after registration. This threshold was itself repeatedly altered during the fieldwork period.⁶ Decisions may be appealed, which prolongs people's stay in this liminal position for years and indefinitely postpones the realisation of their life plans. Within the Dublin system, first registration in Bulgaria makes the country the 'responsible state' for a given asylum claim – a state many of my interlocutors strove to leave but to which they could be returned. The sections that follow examine (im)possible migration as it unfolds at the external border and within the asylum procedure. The two are aspects of a single condition.

Borders and (im)possible migration

The external border as 'entry'

I approach the external border not as a line that delineates territorial sovereignty but as a field of interaction – contested, negotiated, and experienced in encounters between border police officers and asylum seekers. Law operates as a symbolic boundary that demarcates what is permitted and what is prohibited, yet within this framework, discrepancies arise between the legal definitions of 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'economic migrant', and how these categories are applied and lived.

International human rights and refugee law, together with domestic legislation, constructs a matrix of acceptable human conditions and trajectories through which the right to status is either recognised or denied. The empirical material shows that, in Bulgarian institutional practice, the presence or absence of armed conflict in the country of origin functions as an informal filter for who is treated as a 'genuine' refugee: in participants' accounts and in the institutional statements cited below, people who do not come from a state at war are often framed as 'economic migrants'. In this way, institutional practice narrows the working definition of a refugee, shifting the emphasis away from "a well-founded fear of persecution" (United Nations 1951, Art. 1A(2), as amended by United Nations 1967) towards a narrower image of the victim of war. In this sense, the figure of the 'real' refugee, politically and historically shaped as a helpless victim, determines not only who 'deserves' protection but also which narratives and forms of movement can be recognised as legitimate (Malkki 1996). As van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) point out, border regimes encourage templated narratives of admission, stories that 'fit' pre-existing scripts of suffering and threat, thereby making the line between 'economic' migration and 'political' asylum ever thinner. In this context, self-presentation as a 'victim' does not imply full identification with that position, but rather the mobilisation of victimhood as a specific form of symbolic capital (in Bourdieu's sense) within the field of the nation-state. The people with whom I spoke are in situations of crisis but are not consumed by them: their clear sense of who they are and what they aspire to is precisely what generates the tension between border control policies and the lived practices of crossing. Read in this light, such accounts function not only as descriptions of what happened but as the construction of a recognisable refugee story, told to an audience credited with the power to act on it. In my conversations with interlocutors, accounts of

⁶ From October 2015, asylum seekers could work if their case had not been decided within three months of applying. In practice, the clock started at registration, which was often delayed. The provision was amended twice more during 2016.

violence and humiliation at the border were frequently present – dogs set on people, the theft of personal belongings, beatings, being left naked during police checks. Practices of this kind have been documented by human rights organisations for the same period (Human Rights Watch 2014). From my position as a researcher, establishing the factual accuracy of such accounts is both impossible and unnecessary. What matters for the analysis is that these stories exist, circulate, and are often repeated: they structure perceptions of Bulgaria and of the conduct of the border police, and they shape decisions about routes and about whether to cross external borders legally or irregularly. Violence at the border can thus be understood in two complementary ways: as an effect of the encounter with the institution of border policing, and as a result of interactions with individual officers.

The nation-state constructs not only a shared historical past but a shared ‘sensitivity’ about who belongs and who threatens this ‘common’ future. The accounts gathered in this study describe encounters at the border in which the asylum seeker appears at once as ‘foreign’ to the political body of the state and as a potential violator of its sovereignty. What such accounts make visible is not the dispositions of individual officers but the terms in which the border is narrated by those who cross it. These accounts were supplemented by narratives of repeated and unsuccessful attempts to enter Bulgarian territory. Some of these attempts failed because people lost their way in wooded areas; others ended when Bulgarian border police intercepted them and pushed them back to Turkey. A 24-year-old man from Syria, who had subsequently been granted refugee status, recounted that he, his father, and his brother had made seven attempts to enter Bulgaria. An 18-year-old man from Syria, a first-year psychology student before leaving the country, had travelled to Bulgaria with his brother and succeeded only on his eleventh attempt. He, too, had subsequently been recognised as a refugee. These accounts point to the non-monolithic character of the institutions involved. At the border, according to these accounts, Bulgarian border police turned the men back and thereby delayed their access to the asylum procedure; later, however, the asylum determination authority recognised them as refugees. The contradiction is not simply between the state and migrants, but within the state itself, between border enforcement and refugee-status determination.

The double game described above takes a particular form here. Formally, the rule holds that a person who has crossed a border irregularly should not be punished for seeking asylum, provided they identify themselves as seeking protection. In practice, that identification depended on interpretation, and at the border interpretation was provided irregularly – by border-police officers who happened to speak the language, occasionally by Frontex, and most often by interpreters from a non-governmental organisation (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2016, 21–22). The same encounter could therefore be documented in more than one way, and it is this latitude in the application of the rule that both sides acted within. Migrants, for their part, learned through their own networks and from smugglers that if they were recognised as ‘asylum seekers’ they would not be deported. This knowledge turned recognition into a form of symbolic capital that could be mobilised vis-à-vis state institutions. A 20-year-old man from Afghanistan described his situation:

Yes, I entered irregularly. They told me I had to apply for asylum or I would spend four months in prison. I applied, but from the town of Harmanli I went to Sofia, and from Sofia to Vidin. I wanted to cross the border there, but they caught me, and I spent eight months in prison. [...] Nobody explained to me that I wasn’t

supposed to try again. They only told me “Don’t cause problems”, and I understood it as “don’t get into fights”.⁷

From a formal legal perspective, the young man complies with one legal regime while violating another: by applying for asylum, he follows the rules governing access to protection, yet by attempting to leave Bulgaria before a decision is reached, he becomes criminally liable. Bulgarian criminal law exempts asylum seekers from criminal liability for irregular entry, but not for irregular exit while an application is pending (Republika Bulgaria 1968, Art. 279, paras. 1 and 5; for interpretation see Savova n.d.). This is the shape of *(im)possible migration*: a person who has complied with one rule (he has applied) finds that any movement beyond Bulgaria is criminalised, while staying is lived as an unbearable suspension in time and space.

The external border as ‘exit’

The architecture of the European asylum system structures the trajectories analysed in this section. Secondary movement within the EU testifies to the system’s failure to ensure equal standards in procedures, reception and treatment (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016), while destination choice is shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by language and existing social networks (Bendixsen 2016). These differences in reception and recognition orient trajectories towards one European country rather than another.

The people I worked with repeatedly compared conditions in Bulgaria with those in other European states (reception, medical care, the pace of the procedure) and raised these concerns with the UNHCR team. During one focus group, a 42-year-old Syrian man with refugee status, whose wife and three children were with him in Bulgaria, observed that Bulgaria had been in the EU for seven years and could not reach the standard the questions implied, and that these were suited to states with far longer membership. He then made the point explicit: “For refugees, Bulgaria is a transit country. We are grateful for the care we receive, but once we get our documents, we will leave. That is why these questions are not really about us.”⁸

Leaving the country was one of the few ways in which a normal life remained imaginable. When the situation became too dramatic, repeated ‘irregular’ crossings of state borders towards the interior of Europe often appeared as the only conceivable way out. The prompts for such movements can be seen in the following account. A 32-year-old woman from Tunisia (the woman whose question opens this article), whom I call Silvia, described how she experienced her forced stay in Bulgaria.

I’ve been here for a year and a half, being moved from one detention to another. I spent a month and a half in Svilengrad, then I was in the SHAF–Lyubimets, then six months in the SHAF–Busmantsi, and after that I spent nine months in the Sliven prison. What is Bulgaria’s problem? It won’t let us leave, and it won’t give us papers either?⁹

Bulgaria, which does not allow them to leave but also does not give them the documents that would make a life here possible, has, according to Silvia, declared a war on asylum seekers.

We had one war at home, and here they’ve declared another war on us – a psychological war. My life in Bulgaria has fallen apart [...] I even attempted

⁷ Focus group with Afghan asylum seekers, SAR reception centre, Harmanli, October 2014.

⁸ Focus group with Arabic-speaking men granted international protection, SAR reception centre Ovcha Kupel, Sofia, May 2015.

⁹ Focus group with Arabic-speaking women seeking protection, SAR reception centre, Sofia, September 2014.

suicide [...] I was imprisoned with four women. They were all there for murder. One had killed her son.¹⁰

Silvia was imprisoned in Sliven because she attempted to cross the external border again while still following the status-determination procedure. She explained her decision by saying that Bulgaria's institutions had forced her to leave.

If it turns out I don't get status, I'd rather kill myself than go back. I'm not a transit refugee. I've been in Europe; I don't want to go anywhere. I just want to settle down. I was looking for a way to make something happen. When I was released from Busmantsi, I came straight here. And to this day, I have no decision. I cried at the centre's door, begged them to let me in; it was raining, and they didn't let me. I had a little money sent from Greece. I took a taxi and told him to drive to Greece. The taxi cost 600 euros and left me at the border. At the border, they caught me and put me in prison.¹¹

What Silvia calls a "psychological war" captures the layering of legal and territorial boundaries onto her body and biography – boundaries that criminalise movement and transform the simple desire "just to settle somewhere" into an almost unattainable goal.

A man from Afghanistan who had finished school in Bulgaria and wanted to continue his education, and who had previously taught English in Pakistan, shared the following:

If it is hard for Bulgaria to help us, why don't you let us leave? Bulgaria is in the EU, right? Once they take our fingerprints, it becomes hell. Make it easier for us to study and work; that's no problem for us. But don't humiliate us. I sold everything to come here, and this is how we're received... our very dignity is under attack. [...] There is no dignity here. I have lived here for four years. [...]¹²

Here, the enforcement of the Dublin Regulation and EURODAC is experienced as "hell", inscribed on the migrant's body and dignity. I read the quotation as a claim about entitlement: when one state fails to provide real protection, people should have both moral and legal grounds to seek it from others. In the absence of legally established avenues for free movement within the EU, forced migrants invent their own points of permeability and legitimise this movement through various narratives. Here the state's meta-capital is manifested in its capacity to shape concrete lives: through control over legal status, it makes some biographical trajectories realisable and others practically impossible by legal means.

One of the most frequently cited reasons concerns access to the labour market and wage levels. The status of 'asylum seeker' is often an obstacle to legal employment. Under Bulgarian law, the procedure may last up to 21 months (Republika Bulgaria 2002, Art. 75), and in the accounts gathered here it ranged from a few months to more than a year. Even when a person is granted refugee status and has a legally recognised right to work, the problem persists regarding remuneration. A Syrian man, head of a family, put it plainly: "Look, I have five children – how am I supposed to feed them here on a minimum wage [...]"¹³ Leaving for such reasons often occurs in a 'non-legal' way, as a direct result of the constraints on leaving legally. The 42-year-old Syrian man quoted at the start of this section returned to the point later in the discussion:

¹⁰ Focus group with Arabic-speaking women seeking protection, September 2014.

¹¹ Focus group with Arabic-speaking women seeking protection, September 2014.

¹² Focus group with Farsi-speaking Afghan men seeking protection, SAR reception centre Ovcha Kupel, Sofia, October 2015.

¹³ During the period covered by the fieldwork, Bulgaria's minimum monthly wage rose gradually from BGN 310 (approx. EUR 158) in 2013 to BGN 460 (approx. EUR 235) in 2017.

We know that Bulgaria is a good country, but it has no capacity to help us, and we understand that. Here, the region is close in traditions and culture; we feel calm. But without a passport, how can I cross the border?¹⁴

Six months had passed between his arrival and the decision on his case, a period during which the state did not provide financial assistance to asylum seekers. His refugee status did not grant him the right to work or reside in another European country: in the Bulgarian and broader European context, such status implies long-term settlement in the country that granted protection, while travel to other member states is possible mainly as short visits, once a travel document has been issued.

Family and friendship networks in other European countries often motivate attempts to leave Bulgaria even while the procedure is ongoing, when no lawful route to reunification is available. A 38-year-old woman from Syria explained: “My husband died in Syria. I have three children aged 9, 14, and 15. I have no relatives in Bulgaria, but I do in Germany.”¹⁵

A 30-year-old woman from Iraq explained her initial intention to pass through Bulgaria without applying for status:

I tried to transit through Bulgaria. I was caught in Romania and sent back here. I was held in Silistra for six days in a women’s facility. They questioned me every day. Then they took me to Elhovo for a week. Now I’m here. I said in Silistra that I wanted protection. I had lived in Germany for 11 years; my children were born there. Later, my husband and I returned to Kurdistan. [...] My children have German-issued birth certificates.¹⁶

These accounts show how social capital, distributed across different national fields, structures migration trajectories no less than legal regimes and economic constraints. In such cases, mobility under compulsion is a survival strategy: remaking a life and restoring a relatively ‘normal’ rhythm depend on activating a network of kin, friends and professional ties – a network that is itself dispersed, and therefore out of reach. Such movements were also driven by a perceived inequality of access to protection. According to many non-Syrian interviewees, decisions on Syrian applications were reached more readily, and above all more quickly. A staff member from the SAR made clear that recognition followed the presumption attached to the country of origin rather than the account an applicant gave:

If you ask them, even Syrians are economic migrants. At the interview, they say: ‘I came to seek a better life’. And they are given humanitarian status, because we are obliged to grant status to Syrians.¹⁷

The disparity had a procedural basis. From 2014, the SAR applied a *prima facie* approach to Syrian applications, on the understanding that applicants were fleeing internal armed conflict; protection was granted almost without exception, though in the majority of cases as humanitarian rather than refugee status. Afghan applications carried no such presumption: each applicant was left to establish a personal risk of persecution, and recognition stood at 2.5 per cent in 2016 and 1.5 per cent in 2017, against 98 to 99 per cent for Syrian applicants (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2026). What separated the two was not the strength of individual claims but the presumption attached to the country of origin. These disparities

¹⁴ Focus group with Arabic-speaking men granted international protection, SAR reception centre Ovcha Kupel, Sofia, May 2015.

¹⁵ Focus group with Arabic-speaking women seeking protection, SAR reception centre, Sofia, September 2014.

¹⁶ Focus group with Arabic-speaking vulnerable applicants, SAR reception centre Ovcha Kupel, Sofia, June 2015.

¹⁷ Interview conducted by the author, Sofia, 2014.

became widely known through migrant networks and fed the shared belief that “Bulgaria grants protection only to Syrians”, reinforcing expectations among many Afghan applicants that their own claims would ultimately be rejected.

What staff described as the wish for “a better life” was often heard without sensitivity to context. For someone living in peacetime the phrase may sound like a purely economic aspiration, but for someone from a country in prolonged armed conflict it denotes access to the basic conditions of existence: safety, the absence of bombing and violence, healthcare, food, water. This opposition between the ‘economic migrant’ and the ‘real refugee’ has been extensively critiqued as a form of ‘categorical fetishism’ – a term coined by Apostolova (2015) and developed by Crawley and Skleparis (2018) to capture how such categories fail to reflect the complex and overlapping drivers of forced migration. The boundary between ‘genuine’ and ‘false’ grounds for seeking protection is drawn not only in categories but at the border itself, in the way institutions govern movement and access to protection. Taken together, these motives describe a shared logic: migration is directed towards fields in which capital already acquired, qualifications, language, kinship ties, prior residence in Europe, can be recognised, and in the Bulgarian field is not.

The procedure: waiting

If the border is where (im)possible migration takes its spatial form, the procedure is where it takes its temporal one. The same legal mechanism that binds a person to the country of first entry reaches well beyond the border crossing. An Afghan man who had built a life in Austria, and who suffered from epilepsy and other health problems, recounted:

If Bulgaria has asked for me back from Europe, I cannot understand it. I don’t feel well here. I want to have my own life. Don’t you see what it is like here? In Austria, I was managing on my own. Please help me, since the Bulgarian government has requested me, and they promised me a passport. I just want a better life.¹⁸

This is a case of the Dublin Regulation and the EURODAC system in practice: his first registration as an asylum seeker in Bulgaria makes the country the ‘responsible state’ for examining his claim. For him, however, this appears not as an abstract allocation of responsibility but as an act of will: “Bulgaria has asked for me back from Europe”. The Dublin procedure does not simply designate a responsible state; it is lived as a violent reordering of a life, a legal mechanism that returns a person to a place they have already left and describe as impossible to inhabit.

The status determination procedure often lasts for months and, where refusal is followed by appeals, may stretch over years. Institutions did not treat that time as neutral either. A list of house rules posted in April 2014 in the reception centre in Harmanli, documented by Hristova and colleagues, instructed residents to be patient in awaiting a decision, warning that those who were not might receive their status later, or not at all, should they damage relations with the administration. The list was an initiative of the centre’s management rather than a general regulation, and was removed after complaints; but it makes visible a logic that the procedure enacted more quietly (Hristova et al. 2014, 1). Patience was thus made a condition of recognition, in a system where Afghan applicants were recognised at only a small fraction of the rate applied to Syrians (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2026). Andersson (2014, 16–18) describes a comparable arrangement in Ceuta, where the camp’s schedules held out the promise of accumulating ‘good time’ for those who played by the rules,

¹⁸ Focus group with Afghan asylum seekers, SAR reception centre, Harmanli, October 2014.

and where the dossier kept on each resident was said to help them eventually reach the peninsula – a regime that frontline workers themselves described as arbitrary in its sanctions and erratic in its appointments.

Time is a decisive factor for asylum seekers: prolonged waiting for a decision often generates the desire to leave and to cross into Western Europe ‘illegally’, as Tazzioli (2018) observes. Apostolova’s (2016, 44–45) fieldwork in Bulgarian detention facilities documents a similar linguistic embodiment of this condition, where waiting appears in the imperative *chakai!* (wait!) – a word that had become inseparable from the vocabulary of those held inside. Rotter’s (2016, 95–96) ethnography of the asylum determination process in Glasgow shows that length of residence could occasionally become an asset – not through any inherent effect of time, but through external mechanisms such as the application of human rights law or a one-off exercise to clear a backlog of unresolved cases – opening a narrow, contingent path towards leave to remain. In the Bulgarian asylum procedure, duration carries no such effect: whatever accrues over that time cannot be converted into a claim to remain, and the constraints fixed by first registration under the Dublin system continue to bind applicants to a state many were trying to leave. Rotter (2016, 88–92) also shows that waiting is far from empty: it fills the present with relationships, practices and possibilities for action. The empirical material bears this out, but with a crucial difference: here, the generative effects of waiting are directed outward. Waiting can be endured in place only by those with a stake in the game they are made to play; for interlocutors whose stake lay elsewhere, who sought status only as a means of onward movement, the same waiting turned its energy towards leaving. Time in the asylum procedure was experienced as biographical time lost: chronological time went on passing, while the biographical trajectory it would ordinarily sustain remained suspended.

Waiting does not only prolong a life; it can also be entered into already broken. The story of an Afghan family shows how border control cuts through social ties. The spouses were travelling as part of a larger group, with their two children, one of them eight months old. After entering Bulgaria irregularly, the group moved on to Serbia. The father carried the older child and the mother the baby; when she grew tired, another man from the group took the baby to help her. On encountering the border police, the group was split: the man holding the baby managed to cross into Serbia, while the parents remained on the Bulgarian side. The mother recounted: “I saw them take my child. I wanted to take him back, but the police said, ‘It’s your problem that you set off with a baby. Now you will have to suffer’.” The father added: “I begged the police: ‘Let my wife stay there with the child; I only want to take my baby and come back’. They refused me.”¹⁹

The strict application of “the rules of the game” altered the family’s trajectory, deepening the uncertainty they were already in while their child remained elsewhere. This account shows that (im)possible migration is not exhausted by the physical act of crossing but is also structured through social and symbolic boundaries.

“As if he had never existed”: Institutional non-recognition

While teaching Bulgarian to young people and children seeking international protection, one particular expression stayed with me: “everything is not here”. At first, I thought it was a result of people’s difficulty in formulating their thoughts in Bulgarian. Over time, I came to realise that it probably carried a much deeper and symbolic meaning: for those who used it,

¹⁹ Focus group with Farsi-speaking Afghan detainees, Special Home for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners, Lyubimets, June 2016.

the ‘everything’ existed, it was real, but it was not here. Here, in Bulgaria, was the ‘not having’ of that ‘everything’. This experience of absence recurred in various forms: the absence of loved ones, the absence of documents, the absence of clarity about the procedure, the absence of any prospect of recognition.

This disposition surfaced in my conversations with adult men taking part in the focus groups as well. For them, however, ‘not-having’ was no longer only a sense of absence but also a motive through which they voiced their wish to leave the country. Most of them had crossed from Turkey into Bulgaria intending to transit through its territory, but had been detained in the interior and had lodged an application for international protection. After the time spent awaiting a decision on their applications, waiting had turned into a confirmation of the impossibility of obtaining status. An Afghan man of 28, whose family was in Pakistan at the time of the interview, shared:

I am dissatisfied. The Arabs are given priority, and we stay much longer. This thing with the administration is very strange: one boy lost his card, he went to get a new one, and he wasn’t in the system, even though he has been here for a year. As if he had never existed... once people started talking about it, whether it is true or not, no longer matters.²⁰

Another 22-year-old man from Afghanistan in the same focus group added:

We’ve had it drilled into us; we’re used to the idea that there is no status for Afghans. We haven’t seen a single Afghan with status so far. We just sit and do nothing; we can’t even work for such a long time. I just want to move on now. I don’t care what will happen. Nothing has happened for two months.²¹

In these accounts, time and space are experienced in a specific way: space becomes a constraint on time, stretching and prolonging it into periods that at times feel endless, unbearable, and excruciating. Bulgaria is lived as a place where one sits and does nothing, where a year of presence leaves no trace. The absence of documents, or of any trace in the state administrative system despite a year-long presence while awaiting a decision, is experienced as a form of institutional non-recognition: an absence from the temporal and spatial order through which the nation-state acknowledges persons as legal subjects. The phrase “as if he had never existed” carries within it the question of whether he will ever be recognised as existing – whether and when a person acquires a legitimate right to organise their life.

Conclusion

Administrative procedures and legal regimes in the field of asylum construct those seeking protection simultaneously as vulnerable subjects deserving of protection and as a potential threat to the sovereignty and security of the state. This double figure legitimises restrictive policies, which in turn meet the strategies of people seeking international protection. From that encounter, the double game arises, becoming a structural feature of the field of asylum.

The game, however, is played from unequal positions. The state holds meta-capital, and with it the power to classify: it determines who may be recognised as a refugee or granted another form of protection and who remains outside these categories as an ‘illegal’ or ‘economic’ migrant; who may enter the territory of Bulgaria and thereby of the EU, and who remains beyond this physical and symbolic border. The rules within which those seeking protection

²⁰ Focus group with Farsi-speaking Afghan men seeking protection, SAR reception centre Vrazhdebna, Sofia, June 2015.

²¹ Focus group with Farsi-speaking Afghan men seeking protection, June 2015.

are compelled to act also bind the institutions that apply them. A person may present themselves as an asylum seeker not only at the border but also after being detained on the territory of the country. From that moment the state, having exercised its power over them, finds itself bound by a set of obligations in turn: to provide access to a reception centre, to register the application, and to decide on it. At the same time, these obligations leave room for administrative discretion over the timing of their fulfilment: when the application will be registered and when the interview will be conducted rests with officials. The same holds for place: submitting an application does not in itself preclude placement in a detention facility. Thus, for those who have managed to cross the border, constraints continue inside the procedure, where time slows movement, redirects it, and ties it to the duration of the procedure itself. This is the state's move in the double game: the rule is not broken; it is applied to its limit.

The game unfolds along two dimensions: spatial, at the border, where access narrows, and temporal, within the procedure, where waiting stretches. From the interaction between these constraints and the continuing strategies of movement, the condition I have termed (im)possible migration is produced. Silvia's question at the beginning of this article names that condition: the impossibility of either staying or leaving. The two impossibilities are two effects of a single mechanism: the rule that obliges Bulgaria to examine the application simultaneously binds the person to its territory and closes off the possibility of lawful onward movement.

The Bulgarian case makes visible, at an early stage, a logic of border control that subsequently unfolds in other parts of Europe. The fence along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, pushbacks and prolonged detention became established here as instruments for managing movement between 2013 and 2015, before comparable measures became general elsewhere in the Union. The logic is the same: the border regime does not halt movement but determines the conditions under which it can continue and the limit it can reach. The people I spoke with describe not only how they cross state borders, but how those borders cut across their lives.

Note on author

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