



2024. Distributing jars of lentils for refugees near the Harmanli camp, in Bulgaria © Food Not Bombs (Sofia, Bulgaria)

Freedom of movement, food with dignity

On April 10, 2024, the European Union (EU) launched a New Pact on Migration and Asylum which develops a number of hostiles, repressive, racist measures against freedom of movement and asylum rights. The Pact introduces or updates regulations which, in contrast to former EU directives, will be directly incorporated to the legal systems of the 27 member States. It establishes and legitimizes the loss of freedom and rights for people arriving in Europe, through systematic practices of detention, classification and deportation. It will practically mean a notable increase in the suffering of people trying to arrive and to become regular in our continent.

The suffering comes from a long time ago. In Eastern Europe, the so-called 'Balkan route' towards Central Europe consolidated in 2015, when the amounts of asylum applicants arriving through land or sea from Turkey started to increase notably. Then and now, people were running away from the Syrian conflict, but also from the worsening of the situation in Afghanistan, the chronification of conflicts in Central Africa, the persistent aggression of Israel on Palestine, the destruction of Iraq, the multilateral aggressions against the Kurdish people.

An initial response to the 2015 crisis was to open escape corridors from Turkey toward Central Europe. This gave origin to parallel routes from East to West and from South to North, through which thousands of persons managed to find refuge. But the gates were soon closed. In March 2016, the EU advanced the Dublin accords, which practically closed the borders to asylum applicants, except for limited amounts accorded by countries of origin (in contravention of the 1951 Geneva Convention), which were never satisfied anyway. The development of the Dublin accords also extended the mistreatment of exiled people in search for refuge to countries in the periphery of Europe (Turkey, Libia, Marocco), by subcontracting these countries to keep asylum applicants away from the Schengen space.

The New Pact, which was one year old on 10 April, is one step forward in the escalation of institutional violence against the people who come to Europe in search for refuge.

[Food Not Bombs](#) (FNB) is a global movement that promotes cooking and sharing food with whoever needs it, from a standpoint of co-participation and solidarity. From the 6th to the 8th of September 2024, the FNB group in Sofia (Bulgaria) organized an action to prepare and serve a meal to people on the move hosted at the Harmanli refugee reception centre, in collaboration with two other collectives which support people on the move in Bulgaria: [The No Name Kitchen](#) (NNK) team and the Italian [Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche](#) (CRB).

The purpose of this action was to offer the refugees residing at the Harmanli centre a dish connected to their cultural background (most residents in Harmanli come from Syria or from Syrian Kurdistan). A Lebanese volunteer from FNB coordinated us to cook a traditional Lebanese recipe —*miaddara hamra*—, as well as facilitating communication with refugees by interpreting between Arabic and English.

Bulgaria keeps all its asylum applicants in residential facilities or detention centres. Through 2024, the State Agency for Refugees had a Budget for their maintenance of 3.08 euro per day and person, based on numbers of refugees from 2015. But, through the last ten years, inflation and refugee income to reception centres have grown. Recent reports indicate that asylum applicants living in reception centres are now at the brink of severe malnutrition, because of the limited provision of food. In a recent report, the physician at the Harmanli reception centre was pointing out that tap water is neither drinkable nor apt for basic hygiene. But residents have no access to any other source of water.

At Bulgarian refugee reception centres, the provision of hot water and the maintenance of infrastructure and equipment in bathrooms, bedrooms and common areas are still deficient. For many years now, dorms are covered in filthiness and severely infested with plagues, including bedbugs, lice, cockroaches and rats. Allergic reactions and skin inflammation are common, as a direct consequence of vermin.

The feet of persons on the move are also damaged after months walking long distances without appropriate shoes. As well as organizing food distribution, CRB offers medical services and material and responds to emergency situations. NNK also offers medical care, distributes clothes, organizes activities for women and children and publishes reports about the situation of people on the move and about the frequent aggressions against them on the border. NNK keeps teams in Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Italy and Ceuta.

Bombs will keep falling, they will build higher fences, they will keep looking at people with the eye of aiming to kill. We will keep walking and cooking to share the food.

Only mutual support will save us.

[Félix Díaz](#) is a Professor of Psychology at New Bulgarian University. He takes part in the Sofia Food Not Bombs group and in the research team of the activist organization Europe Must Act, which promotes the dignified reception and inclusion of refugees in Europe.

More information:

[*Bloody Borders Project*](#), including testimonies of border violence against people on the move.

[*Border Violence Monitoring Network*](#).

[Europe Must Act](#).

[No Name Kitchen YouTube channel](#).