

Maria Cheresheva: Bulgarians who try to help migrants are accused of smuggling [AUDIO]

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Maria Cheresheva - a Bulgarian freelance journalist who has documented abuses along the Balkan migration route to Western Europe via Bulgaria - spoke to Cross-border Talks about her findings. She has discovered black sites where migrants are held illegally. She is aware of a massive trend of systematic beatings and violence on the Bulgarian border with Turkey. The situation along the Balkan migrant route is very dynamic and has changed drastically over the years, Cheresheva says. The fence that has been built on the Bulgarian-Turkish border is easy to cross with the help of smugglers. At the same time, there are no legal ways for migrants to enter and cross Bulgarian territory. Nobody is allowed by the Bulgarian authorities to apply for asylum in an official and legal way. Cheresheva explains that Bulgaria is following the example of Greece, where migrant rights activists are pushed away from the border areas.

Vladimir Mitev: Welcome to another cross-border talk, this time focusing on the Balkan route for migrants to the European Union. There have been many investigations and serious cases of abuse on this Balkan route. Joining us now is Maria Cheresheva, a freelance Bulgarian journalist specialising in migration issues. She has worked with various Bulgarian and international media and she's also a member of the Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria. Maria Cheresheva has done a number of investigations over the last year and more, dealing with cases of abuse, where people have been shot at the border, presumably or allegedly by the Bulgarian authorities, cases where people have literally died trying to cross the border or pass through Bulgarian territory. So she has a lot of experience and she is now invited to comment on her findings. First of all, Maria, could we start by asking you to give us a sort of summary of the main findings of your investigations over the last year or more?

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me, Vladimir. Actually, I've been researching this subject for more than ten years. It's just that these investigations of the last three years have somehow attracted more international attention. Otherwise, I'm afraid this is not a problem that emerged yesterday.

It's been ongoing since the refugee crisis started as a result of the war in Syria, and after that, with the events in Afghanistan and the ongoing instability in the Middle East region. So what we've seen over the last ten years is an increasing securitisation of Europe's borders. And as a country that is on the external borders of the European Union, Bulgaria is more and more expected to protect the European Union from people coming in. And I'm afraid that our findings, our investigations have shown that sometimes this is done at any cost.

In our cooperation with Lighthouse Reports, which is an international investigative collective, at the

end of 2002 we looked for so-called black sites. These are places where asylum seekers are detained without being allowed to register or apply for asylum. And instead of that, in the Bulgarian case, they are sent back to where they came from. Most of these cases are from Turkey, because most of the people cross the Bulgarian-Turkish border (I have seen data about people being pushed back to Greece, but that is just a tiny number of cases). So what we found was, I could say, like data for systematic pushbacks and violence. And we recorded on camera how people are kept in a cage-like structure on the territory of one of the border police stations close to the Turkish border and then sent back to Turkey. This is a typical black site, basically a place where no law is respected or applied.

During this investigation, we also came across the case of a person who was shot during a situation of tension on the Bulgarian-Turkish border with people protesting at the border fence. We carried out a forensic investigation into the direction and origin of the shot, with an expert who is a former FBI official, who gave us the reason to claim that the bullet was fired from the Bulgarian side, where in the video evidence that we got, you could see that the border police were assigned. But in this case, the Bulgarian authorities have denied all these allegations in the case of the cage-like structure. At the moment the prosecutor's office is investigating this practice and hopefully we will see that somebody will be punished for this, because we saw it pretty much with our own eyes.

[Our last investigation](#) concerns an issue that more and more organisations are starting to talk about, which I think is kind of good news. It's about the people who are dying on the Balkan route, which is one of the most popular routes at the moment – maybe not in winter, but in summer – with people hiding and trying to cross without being noticed. Unfortunately, some of them die because of exhaustion, because of various illnesses. They have no way of getting help because they are afraid of being pushed back. And their families are left in limbo, just looking for their loved ones who have disappeared along the way. Unfortunately, we have evidence that about 100 people have died on Bulgarian soil in the last two years, but these are only the cases that we have been able to verify. I'm afraid there are many, many more, probably in the forests of the strange mountain. That's it in a nutshell.

Based on your ongoing research and studies on the subject, how is the current situation of the Balkan route and the migrants on it evolving over time? Is it getting worse? What kind of people are using this Balkan route? Who are the traffickers? How has the overall situation developed over the last two years?

The situation is very dynamic and has changed drastically over the years. At the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2013 and 2014, large groups of people were allowed to enter Bulgaria because the country was completely unprepared for a large influx of migrants. People were sent to open reception centres and could more or less seek asylum in Bulgaria or continue their route to the Western countries, which is basically where they are heading. But in the last ten years, also as a result of European policies and processes that are happening in the European Union, the focus has been on security. So we have a fence along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, which is not very effective. It has been proven several times that it is very easy to cross, especially with the help of smugglers. There are, I would say, very reasonable accusations of massive repression and aggression against people who have entered Bulgaria through illegal routes. And here we have to say that there are no legal routes. I mean, you have to have a visa or some kind of official document, which it's almost impossible to have in places like Syria and Afghanistan. And although people are directed to the official border crossings, in reality nobody – neither the Turkish authorities nor the Bulgarian authorities – would allow people to apply for asylum at the official border crossing. So, unfortunately, most people choose to do it illegally, trying to cross themselves or, more often, trying to cross with smugglers.

There are many ways to do this. One way is on foot and then people are transported within Europe or by people hidden in lorries, in cars, in different vehicles, which unfortunately has led to many deaths in recent years. You probably remember the case of 18 Afghans, including a child, who died of suffocation in a lorry on Bulgarian territory after being abandoned by smugglers. So, unfortunately, my impression and the impression of our colleagues is that this route is becoming more and more dangerous.

Małgorzata Kulbaczevska-Figat: Not long ago, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior claimed that Bulgaria and Romania couldn't be accepted into the Schengen zone because of the issue of irregular migration. At the moment, both countries have been accepted into the partial Schengen area, and one of the conditions was that controls on their mutual border would be tightened, and the Syrian and Afghan immigrants would be taken to Bulgaria and Romania. I wonder how this solution affects the plight of the refugees, both those who are taking the Balkan route and those who would apparently be sent to Romania and Bulgaria to be accommodated there. I wonder if this move, which has met with mixed reactions from Bulgaria and Romania, won't be another development that makes the Balkan route even more risky, even more marked by setbacks and border violence. What do you think?

First of all, I would say that the Austrian government is using this issue for political gain because of the upcoming elections in that country. We had a very absurd situation when the leaders of that country visited Bulgaria and proposed to build a concrete wall on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. It's several hundred kilometres long. So you can imagine what that would look like. And also it would be absolutely, complicated and expensive to carry out such a project. So the Bulgarian border has been a topic of political gossip for European and Austrian politicians for quite some time. Of course, the migration condition would be used for further negotiations on Schengen. What I'm seeing is that the European institutions are also supporting Bulgaria and Romania's application for Schengen. I would say that this is absolutely fair, because there are many other countries that have migration problems, but they are in Schengen, like Italy, Greece, Spain. I mean, this is a geographical problem. It's not a problem that we can regulate to the extent of 100% migration. This is used to twist the hands of the Bulgarian government, but also of the European authorities. Unfortunately what we don't see in these negotiations is the human rights aspect, because in general the European Union is based on certain principles that have to be respected and human. Respect for human rights and human dignity should be one of the first things in the Schengen negotiations and in the whole monitoring process. Because there have been human rights violations that journalists, non-governmental organisations and very few politicians have talked about. And they are not taken into account at all. So I'm not very positive that these processes will lead to a fairer treatment of people, because we're talking about people.

In Poland, where the humanitarian crisis of migrants on the border with Belarus has been going on for more than two years. People have also died on the borders. People have also been pushed back to Belarus. People have also been denied any kind of registration or any kind of chance to tell their story, to ask for asylum. When I saw the photos of anonymous graves in your publications, when I read about people trying to find out what happened to their family members at the border, I also thought about the situation in Poland, and then I remembered that in my country there was also a whole movement of humanitarian activists who helped people in the forest, at the border, with food, with warm clothes. There were even doctors involved, providing basic medical assistance. I would like to ask, is the same happening on the Balkan route, or is there hardly anyone taking care of the migrants?

Unfortunately, this is not happening on the Balkan route. It happened at the beginning of the crisis, when it was not criminalised to want to help. But I'm afraid that Bulgaria is following the example of Greece, where basically activists, volunteers and human rights groups have been pushed away from the border areas and from areas like the Moria camp, as you know, in Lesbos. So in Bulgaria we're implementing "best practices", in quotes, from other countries where it's very, very risky to actually go into these areas and try to help. So there are some collectives, some of them are not even Bulgarian citizens, and there are some NGOs that are trying to provide help at the border. But the border authorities would not allow people and activists to just wander around the border forest and help people in need. This is an issue that remains unresolved. And, um, I think that bigger humanitarian organisations should intervene in these areas, because otherwise people are just left to die in the forest. And people who try to help them run the risk of being accused of smuggling.

I think the most important message of today's border talk is that migrants, people on the move, people seeking a better life in Europe, are first and foremost human beings.

That is something we must never forget. And unfortunately, when we look at the policies that are being implemented in different border countries of the European Union, we might get the impression that actually everybody forgets that everybody in power, everybody in power is talking about security, about tightening border controls and not allowing unauthorised people to come into Europe. And at the same time we are talking about people. We are talking about people like you and me. We are also talking about people. And I think it's also important to remember that people who don't have open legal ways to come to Europe. I am sure that if people had the choice between crossing the forest and the mountains and risking the violence of the border police, or coming here with a visa through a legal process, they would never have questioned it. They would never ask themselves which is the best choice. It would be obvious, but they don't have that option. Thank you for your attention!

Maria Cheresheva is the guest of today's Cross-Border Talk. We encourage you to find and read other Maria spaces available online. She is a very experienced journalist working on issues such as migration and human rights. And I'd also like to ask you not to forget to subscribe to the cross-border talks so that you don't miss any episode, either on YouTube or on SoundCloud or other social media platforms. Thank you for joining us and see you again.

Małgorzata Kulbaczewska-Figat Cross-Border Talks co-founder and co-coordinator. Poland-based journalist reporting on political life and social changes in Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on labour movements. Examining peripheral capitalism and people's self-organisation. Digging out forgotten history of Polish (and East-European) workers' struggles. Her texts were published by Dziennik Trybuna in Poland, Left.it in Italy, Avgi in Greece and other progressive outlets.

Vladimir Mitev is a Bulgarian Romanian-speaking and Persian-speaking journalist. He is the founder of the Bulgarian-Romanian blog "The Bridge of Friendship", as well as the founder of the Bulgarian-Romanian-Persian blog "The Persian Bridge of Friendship". Vladimir is correspondent of Radio Romania for Bulgaria and is an editor at the Romanian section of Radio Bulgaria.

Maria Cheresheva

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