

## INTRODUCTION

**With the continued implementation of new border policies along the Western Balkans migration route, thousands more people are currently stranded en route.**

Since the last situation update by REACH on 4 March, the EU-Turkey Summit was held in Brussels, resulting in the further tightening of border restrictions for migrants.\* The summit produced a broad plan, coined 'one-in, one-out', which foresees the return of migrants who do not meet asylum criteria from Greece to Turkey. In exchange, the EU will accept one refugee for every returned migrant from Turkey and relocate them to one of the 28 EU member states.<sup>1</sup>

Following the announcement of the EU-Turkey plan, Slovenia informed humanitarian partners that as of midnight on March 8th, authorities would fully implement the provisions of the Schengen Border code, effectively closing the borders to almost all migrants wishing to transit.<sup>2</sup> Croatia and Serbia quickly followed suit. As with other policy changes in recent weeks, the domino effect has led to backlog along the Western Balkans Corridor, **leaving increasing numbers of people of all nationalities stranded** further back along the migration route.

**Despite the closure of borders, migrants have continued to arrive in Greece,** ignorant of recent changes or undeterred by the

implications of the EU-Turkey agreement.<sup>3</sup> As of 16 March 2016, **more than 43,000 refugees and migrants are currently present in the Greece, with a daily average of 1,277 new arrivals for the month of March.**<sup>4</sup> Continuing arrivals and new border restrictions have caused the profile and needs of people stranded at border points to change, with increasing numbers of stranded Syrians and Iraqis, as well as Afghans.

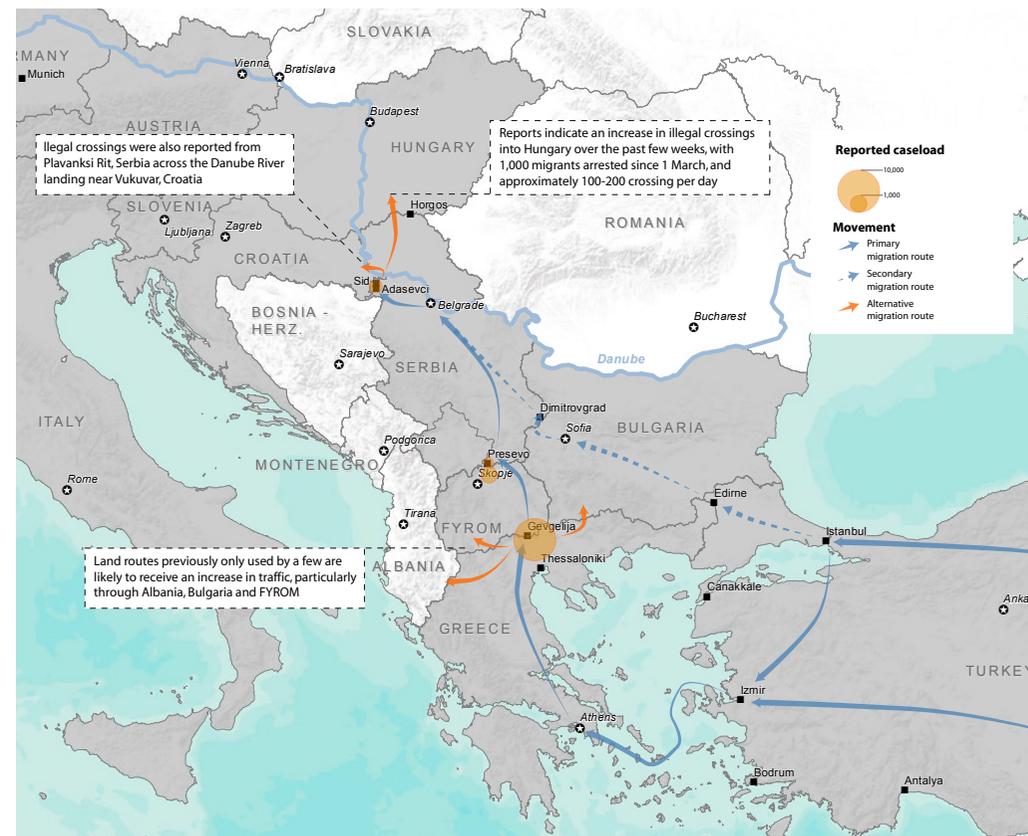
Afraid of continuing closures, push-backs and further restrictions, **large numbers of people are leaving cramped conditions at transit sites and attempting to continue their journeys through Europe using illegal means.** Often resorting to the use of smugglers in order to travel, these migrants are at risk of personal injury, abuse and exploitation.

This report provides an update on the humanitarian situation across the Western Balkans, including information about the caseload and needs of stranded migrants in Serbia and FYROM, and highlighting the emergence of alternative routes.

## Situation and Needs of Stranded Migrants

### SERBIA

**Over the past two weeks, Serbia has seen the emergence of a growing population of stranded migrants.** While initially these



**Map 1: Reported caseload of stranded migrants and illegal crossing points across the Western Balkans**

were mainly Afghan nationals who have faced restrictions on travel through Serbia and FYROM since 21 February, more recent criteria have affected Syrian and Iraqi migrants, severely limiting onward travel. As of 16 March, this has left **around 2,000 migrants of all nationalities stranded at transit camps and reception centres across the Serbia.**<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [BBC, "Migrant crisis: EU and Turkey plan one-in, one-out deal", 8 March 2016](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Guardian, "Slovenia and Croatia ban transit of refugees to other European countries" 9 March 2016](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UNHCR, Winter Operations Cell Daily Report 9 March 2016](#)

<sup>4</sup> [UNHCR Winter Operations Cell Daily Report, 16 March 2016](#)

\*This report uses the word migrant to refer to all those travelling to Europe, including people who intend to seek asylum and may later gain refugee status

## METHODOLOGY

Findings presented in this report are drawn from primary data collected by REACH between 2 and 15 March 2016. Information was gathered through 54 structured interviews and participatory mapping exercises conducted with groups of migrants in FYROM and Serbia, in order to understand their demographic profile, humanitarian needs and future intentions. Findings are complemented by key informant interviews with officials at border points, and aid actors.

Throughout this report, findings are complemented by data from regular monitoring of mainstream and social media, as well as with other sources of humanitarian information. Findings are also triangulated with information from interviews with operational NGOs in the Balkan corridor.

## LIMITATIONS

Due to the purposive selection of groups for interview, results do not constitute a representative sample of all migrants travelling through FYRoM/Serbia at the time of assessment. Rather, the information collected provides a snapshot of migration through a key transit country at a particular point in time, which is also indicative of wider trends. Alternative routes and experiences exist that are not represented in this assessment.

## SID and ADASEVCI

**As of the 14 March, Refugee Aid Points at Sid and Adasevci, both located near the border with Croatia, together hosted a total of around 850 migrants.<sup>5</sup>**

According to interviews with border officials on 8 March, Syrians and Iraqis represented the majority of Migrants in Sid, with a minority of Afghans and Moroccans also present.

In most cases, the length of time spent in Serbia coincides directly with implementation of new border policies. Groups at Sid and Adasevci had been stranded for between a matter of hours and more than one month, with Afghans and some Iraqis from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq having waited the longest. In contrast, Syrians from Raqqa and other areas held by non-government armed groups had been stranded for between 7 and 15 days. Due to new restrictions following the EU-Turkey Summit, general restrictions are now in place which affect all migrants, with no trains having arrived from Croatia in the past days.

In Sid and Adasevci, conditions at Refugee Aid Points are not suitable for longer-term stays, with no showers available to migrants and limited food available. No hot meals are provided in Sid transit camp, although some migrants are able to subsidize the assistance received with produce bought from local markets. Living on a diet consisting of primarily tinned fish, many migrants complained about problems with their digestion.<sup>6</sup>

In Adasevci, accommodation has been

segregated, so that women and children sleep in a motel while men are sleep in tents, de facto increasing the risk of family separation. Migrants in Adasevci are also prevented from leaving the site. This limits their access to banks and Western Union shops, preventing them from retrieving money for additional expenses, or exploring alternative options. This is different to the situation in Sid, where facilities are open and migrants are free to come and go as they please, many using services in the nearby town.

Knowing that legal options to reach Europe had disappeared entirely, many Afghans interviewed in Sid mentioned they would be open to learning more about seeking asylum in Serbia. While information is provided in English and Arabic within the Refugee Aid Point, migrants explained that no Farsi translators were available and that they therefore had no way to communicate with authorities or other aid workers.<sup>7</sup>

Authorities at the Sid Refugee Aid Point reported intending to divide the stranded population at the centre amongst the three centres near the Croatian border; Principovac, Adasevci and Sid.<sup>8</sup>

## PRESEVO

**Available accommodation for migrants in Presevo is at full capacity, with 682 migrants hosted there as of 14 March.** According to UNHCR, 35% are Syrians, 34% Afghans and 30% Iraqis.<sup>9</sup> Most had been there for more than ten days.

Aid workers report that around ten individuals leave the camp daily. It is assumed that these people have selected informal means for further travel.

The ability of migrants to travel throughout the Balkans corridor despite official border closures is also highlighted by the arrival of 14 Syrian refugees to Presevo Registration Centre from FYROM on 6 March. These migrants reached the centre without going through the profiling procedures in Miratovac, indicating that they had crossed the border illegally.<sup>10</sup> Serbian authorities and international organisations are providing food and non-food items for those stranded as well as counseling migrants on their legal options.

## BELGRADE

**Migrants interviewed by REACH assessment teams in Belgrade consisted primarily of those travelling by irregular means.** These migrants do not have proper transit papers and are considered to have entered the country illegally. Without a transit visa, these migrants face greater risks, and recent border closures have left them little option than to resort to the use of smugglers to continue their journey.

NGOs have reported that smugglers, referred to by migrants as “agents”, are strategically located around the bus and train station in Belgrade, as well as within asylum centres in Serbia.<sup>11</sup> For migrants in Belgrade, the top priority is to continue their journey towards the EU. As a result, this group is less likely to seek services or assistance, for fear it will slow down their passage.

5 UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 14 March 2016

6 REACH key informant interview 15 March 2016

7 REACH interviews Sid 6 March 2016

8 REACH key informant interview Sid 10 March 2016

9 UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 14 March 2016

10 UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 7 March 2016

11 UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 8 March 2016

## Migrants from Afghanistan and Iran, Belgrade

In Belgrade and Sid, REACH interviewed young adults travelling from Iran and Afghanistan, who had become stranded without any means to continue their journey and reported considering returning to their country of origin. They had applied for voluntary return through the International Organisation for Migration in Sid, who advised them to contact their nearest embassy to start the process of official deportation, as it was the embassies who should bear the costs of their return trip. For Afghans, the nearest embassy is located in Sofia, Bulgaria. These groups have limited documentation, restricted legal travel opportunities due both to depleted financial resources as well as prohibition by neighbouring countries to allow Afghan migrants to legally transit through their territory. They are also limited by communication capacity as few Afghans have the ability to converse in English and there are a limited number of interpreters to assist them in understanding the recent border closures as well as their legal rights and options.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the speed at which new policies have been adopted, it has been difficult for those who are able to communicate with local aid workers and authorities to have a grasp of the situation, much less those who cannot communicate with NGOs/authorities at all.

## CONSEQUENCES IN SERBIA

Migrants who enter Serbia legally are required to register with authorities in Presevo. In accordance with Serbian asylum law, they are granted 72 hours of legal stay within the country.<sup>13</sup> However, due to restrictions on onward movement to Croatia, many migrants extend their stay beyond 72 hours. Legally, migrants in this situation must apply for asylum in Serbia or leave the country within 15 days. For those entering the country illegally, this is considered a “misdemeanor” and carries a fine from 500 - 50,000 RSD (50 - 400 EUR).

Following border closures as of March 8<sup>th</sup>, UNHCR reports a daily average of 9 migrants crossing into Serbia, compared to over 1,200 in late February 2016.<sup>14</sup>

Migrants have been stranded across Serbia, some for weeks others for nearly a month or more. Prevented from moving onwards, **migrants’ immediate needs have changed from food, shelter and non-food items, to proper bathing facilities and access to information** about their travel options and legal rights as well as psychosocial support.

## FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (FYROM)

**Since the introduction of new policies, FYROM has become host to some 1,400 stranded migrants.**

Together with Bulgaria, FYROM previously served as one of two main gateways to the Balkans corridor from Greece, but recent

changes have left migrants stranded at borders. On 10 March, FYROM authorities accepted 437 refugees who had been stranded in the white zone between Serbia and FYROM since 7 March. This situation came about when the last group of migrants entering the Balkans from Greece tried to cross the border with Serbia, but found the border already closed. Serbia refused to accept the migrants, claiming that Croatia had closed its borders so they could not travel through, while police in FYROM refused to take them back because the transit camp in Tabanovatsë was at capacity. The migrants have now been transferred to tents inside the town of Tabanovatsë.<sup>16</sup>

## TABANOVATSE

**As of 10 March, approximately 1,000 migrants were stranded in Tabanovatsë, including around 500 Afghan nationals.**<sup>17</sup> Shelters were overcrowded and around 200 people were living in tents in a muddy field. Some migrants have been stranded in Tabanovatsë for nearly three weeks.<sup>18</sup>

At the time of data collection, no bathing facilities were available to migrants in Tabanovatsë, food provision was scarce, and the portable toilets are overflowing due to the large number of people using them. During the assessment carried out by REACH on 8 March, tensions between migrants and authorities were already visible, as frustrated Afghan migrants who had been waiting to cross the borders for days began to petition groups to leave the camp for the Serbian border.

## GEVGELJIA

According to reports by aid workers, only 17 Syrians and 1 Iraqi are currently hosted in the registration camp in Gevgeljia on the border with Greece. Around 600 migrants arrived to FYROM illegally and were staying in the town of Moiin at the time of assessment. Authorities reported intending to return these groups to Greece.<sup>19</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES IN FYROM

Since borders were closed, FYROM has experienced several large-scale illegal border crossings, such as on 14 March. Around 1,000 migrants attempted to cross into Macedonia via the river Suva, but the group was quickly apprehended by FYROM authorities and will be returned to Greece. Three individuals, two men and one woman, reportedly drowned.<sup>20</sup>

Whether unaware of the border policies, or merely trying to improve their conditions from Idomeni, migrants have increasingly found themselves stranded in FYROM in the hope of passing through, only to be denied entry to Serbia once at border points.

To date, FYROM has not indicated that it will move to criminalize illegal border crossings in the same way as neighbouring Bulgaria. However, this could change in the near future as Serbia starts to consider making similar legal amendments.

Humanitarian conditions in Tabanovatsë are very challenging and capacity and political willingness to continue to host this stranded population is waning. **The longer migrants as**

12 REACH interviews March 2016

13 [Serbian Gazette 109/2007 article 22](#)

14 [UNHCR. Serbia Weekly Registration Statistics of Population on the Move. As of 13 March 2016 & 19 Feb.](#)

15 REACH interviews Presevo 12 March 2016

16 [UNHCR. Macedonia shelters refugees after days stuck in wet field. 10 March 2016](#)

17 Ibid

18 REACH assessment 8 March 2016; Facebook, Refugees Aid Serbia 10 March 2016

19 REACH key informant interview 14 March 2016

20 [UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 8 March 2016](#)

exposed to such harsh living conditions the more likely it is that they will be to seek out alternative routes to Europe.

## EMERGENCE OF NEW ROUTES

With the borders north of Serbia closed as of 9 March, migrants have increasingly begun establishing alternative routes, often assisted by smugglers. While exact numbers are difficult to estimate, it is clear this is an increasing trend. In the case that closures continue, migrants reported that anyone able to attempt an illegal border crossing would consider doing so.

In light of increasing restrictions on movement, smuggling networks are anticipated to begin to play a larger role, with Serbia announcing it will not become a 'parking lot' for migrants.<sup>21</sup> On 11 March, Serbian media reported the apprehension of two individuals charged with smuggling 15 Pakistani nationals into Serbia from FYROM.<sup>22</sup>

Reports have already surfaced of groups of migrants being bussed from transit camps to the Serbian borders with Hungary, Romania and FYROM and told to cross the borders, albeit illegally.<sup>23</sup> All routes explained below are shown on Map 1.

### Serbia to Hungary

According to those working on the border between Serbia and Hungary there has been an increase in illegal crossings over the past few weeks, with 1,000 migrants arrested since 1 March, following approximately 100-200

crossings per day.<sup>24</sup> According to interviews with Afghan and Iranian migrants at the Serbian/Hungarian border, people indicated that the cost of being smuggled to Hungary from Kanjiža in Serbia was around 400 EUR. They explained how smugglers had cut a hole in the razor wire that was big enough to crawl through. When asked if there were concerns about being apprehended by the police, migrants reported that smugglers had prepared to bribe officials in order to allow a safe crossing into Hungary.

### Serbia to Croatia

At the end of February, illegal crossings were also reported from Plavanski Rit, Serbia across the Danube River landing near Vukovar, Croatia.<sup>25</sup> The estimated cost of this route per migrant is around 2,000 EUR. To date, travel along the River Danube has not been considered as a strong, viable alternative route. However, the Danube could increasingly become an option for those stranded within Serbia and looking for an alternative to the land routes. As demonstrated by the thousands of Aegean crossings between Turkey and Greece, water borders are much more porous and can be harder to regulate than land borders.

### FYROM to Serbia

Authorities in Serbia reported that around 33 migrants were found inside an empty cargo train in Presevo, on 12 March. The group comprised of mainly Afghans, but also some Syrians and several people from Libya, all



Image 1: Migrants stranded in Idomeni paint their tents with graffiti protesting border closures

but one were men. As they had crossed the borders illegally, they were turned over to the police.<sup>26</sup>

### Via Albania

Small numbers of migrants have also been reported around Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia, with rumours that people may begin travelling to Italy via Albania. This route was taken by thousands in the 1990s,<sup>27</sup> and is likely to become an increasingly viable option with the onset of Spring, as seas become calmer.

## CONCLUSION

Migrants currently stranded within the Western Balkans vary in profile and nationality. Syrians and Iraqis currently make up the majority of those in camps and transit sites along the route, while Afghans have already been seen to 'disappear' from refugee reception centres in search of alternative means of reaching their preferred destination. Many of these are young men, travelling without family, who may be particularly vulnerable to trafficking and associated protection risks.

21 [B92, "Serbia to react after Slovenia "closes migrant route". 9 March 2016](#)

22 [Blic, "Two people were arrested for attempting to smuggle 15 Pakistanis". 11 March 2016](#)

23 REACH key informant interview 9 March 2016; REACH interviews Sid, 6 March 2016

24 Al Jazeera, "Refugee centres fill up as Hungary tightens borders", 10 March 2016

25 REACH key informant interview 10 March 2016

26 [Reuters, "Hundreds of migrants march out of Greek camp, cross to Macedonia" 15 March 2016](#)

27 [The Economist, "Refugees may start to cross over](#)

REACH observations indicate that **groups who have been stranded for significant amount of time no longer have the resources to continue their journey and are dependent on assistance for food, shelter and clothing**, a finding also confirmed by reports from aid agencies.

**Capacity to shelter stranded refugees is limited across the sites in the Western Balkans, with adequate toilets and bathing facilities in high demand.** Food is also becoming a major need, particularly among those who have exhausted financial resources and are entirely reliant on food assistance in registration and transit centres. Since many transit sites are already at or over planned capacity, rations are stretched, with migrants complaining insufficient food.

Faced with an uncertain legal situation, **the provision of information on rights and process to seek asylum is not always reaching migrants.** Despite attempts to provide information in Arabic and English, the absence of Farsi as well as Kurdish translators is particularly challenging for Afghans and those from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as well as those travelling from Iran.

As shown through interviews conducted along the Western Balkans corridor, migrants intend to seek out alternative routes, the longer they are kept waiting from moving towards their final destination. **Of migrants interviewed, 32% indicated they would seek alternative routes if they remained in their current location for more than 2 weeks.** Afghans and Iranians stranded in Serbia were interviewed

in Kanjiža before attempting to cross the border with Hungary, further evidence that groups will seek-out alternative routes when not able to travel legally.

So far, there have been limited reports on groups travelling through Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Migrants are still using the land route from Turkey through Bulgaria to Serbia, but to a lesser extent due to increased border control and the reputation of Bulgaria as punishing migrants who cross their borders illegally.

The outcome of the EU-Turkey plan has effectively 'closed' travel through the Western Balkans corridor by official means. **With up to 4,000 stranded in Serbia and FYROM and more than 43,000 in Greece, there is a clear need for governments and aid actors to improve the humanitarian conditions of people stranded in immediate term.** In addition, states must collaborate to ensure a more coherent and sustainable policies to deal with migration in the longer term.

### About REACH Initiative

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, you can write to us at: [geneva@reach-initiative.org](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org). Visit [www.reach-initiative.org](http://www.reach-initiative.org) and follow us @REACH\_info.

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