

Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis

February 2016



REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans migration route saw a decrease in the number of arrivals in February compared to the previous months. The average daily number of arrivals to FYROM decreased from 1,719 in January to 1,182 arrivals in February. Serbia also saw a decrease with an average of 1,839 daily arrivals in January compared to 1,215 in February.¹ This decrease was due to several factors: implementation of stricter controls by Turkish authorities; the arrival of NATO vessels in the Aegean Sea²; the introduction of daily quotas; and periodic border closures, which reduced the numbers of people able to travel.

In mid-February, countries in the Western Balkans implemented new border policies in rapid succession. Austria was the first to set limits on the number of migrants that could cross their territory on a daily basis, while FYROM, Serbia and Croatia took the decision to impose further restrictions on the nationalities of those allowed to transit, notably refusing entry to people of Afghan nationality.

This Situation Overview presents the third round of monthly findings from February 2016. Information presented here is part of a series of assessments carried out along the Western Balkan migration route, based on primary data collected from transit points in Serbia and FYROM, and data collected at community level in Syria. This edition focuses

on the humanitarian implications of tightened border policies along the Western Balkans, and is complimented by a rapid assessment by REACH, published on 16 March 2016.

POPULATION PROFILE

Country of Origin

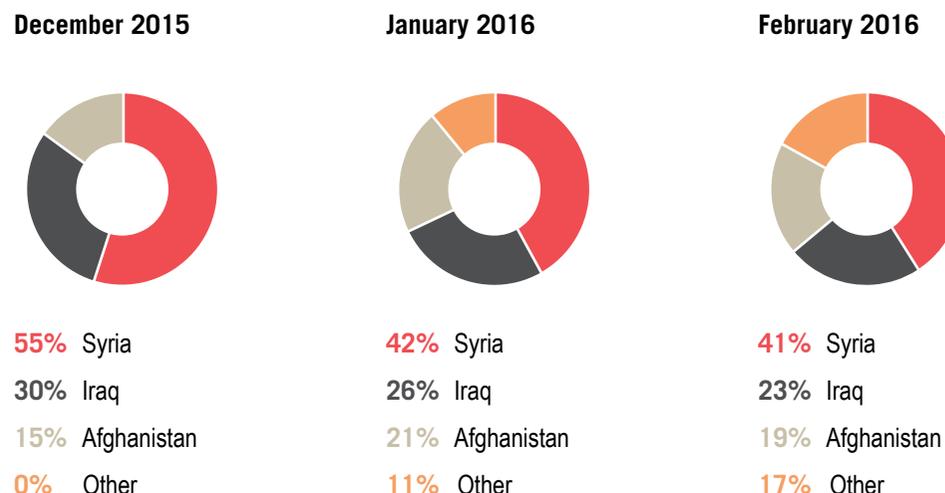
Of the groups interviewed in February, 41% were from Syria, 23% from Iraq, 19% from Afghanistan and 17% from other countries including Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt.

Despite the fact that only Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans have been permitted to transit across the Western Balkans since November 2015, the proportion of people of other nationalities has continued to increase in the past month.

Of those arriving from Syria, the largest proportion of interviewed migrants originated from Aleppo (20%), Idleb (17%) and Damascus (16%), with smaller proportions from Deir-ez-Zor (9%), Rural Damascus (8%), Al Hasakeh (8%), Homs (6%), Dara (6%) and other governorates.

People from Iraq mostly originated from Baghdad and Mosul as well as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) with a few groups traveling from Diyala, Missan, Basrah and Sulaymaniyah governorates. From 17 February, Slovenian authorities began refusing entry to groups of migrants arriving from Baghdad and KRI for

Figure 1: Nationality of interviewed groups, by month



the first time, as these were considered to be “safe” areas of Iraq.

Of those travelling from Afghanistan, the largest proportion came from Kabul and Nangarhar, with smaller proportions from other provinces across the country.

Group composition

Syrians and Iraqis tended to travel with other family members with 47% and 54% respectively, travelling with at least one family member. However, a larger proportion Syrians were travelling alone (8%) than those coming from Iraq (4%). Minors travelling without family from both Syria and Iraq make up 1%.

Of those interviewed from Afghanistan, 47% were males travelling without family, 18% travelled with at least one family member, and 21% were minors travelling without family.

Groups travelling from other countries more commonly consisted of males travelling without family members (71%). A small minority (14%) travelled with at least one adult family member while 8% were minors travelling without family.

*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

1. UNHCR, Daily Estimated Arrivals per Country - Flows through Western Balkans Route
2. BBC, 'Migrant crisis: NATO deploys Aegean people-smuggling patrols', 11 February 2016

METHODOLOGY

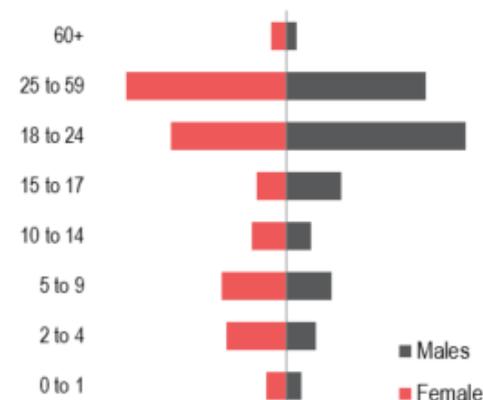
Findings are drawn from primary data collected by REACH between 1 and 29 February 2016. Information was gathered through 266 structured interviews with groups of migrants at major transit points, in order to understand their demographic profile, displacement history, humanitarian needs and future intentions.

Throughout this report, findings are complemented by data from regular monitoring of mainstream and social media, and other sources of humanitarian information. Findings are also complemented by interviews with operational NGOs in the Balkan corridor, and with data collected from Syria, the area of origin of the largest proportion of those in transit.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the purposive selection of groups for interview, results do not constitute a representative sample of all migrants travelling through 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 study.

Figure 2: Demographic breakdown of individuals in assessed groups



During the latter part of the month, groups of all nationalities and compositions reported having been rejected at border crossings. For those who had been pushed back, the majority reported intending to attempt crossing again through the same point. This was particularly common among those travelling as families and in groups with small children. In contrast, **a larger proportion of groups of young adults or those without children reported that they would seek out alternative routes if official border crossings remained closed.**

Demographic Composition

Males continue to represent the majority of those travelling, particularly between the ages of 15-24.

Young males are more likely to be travelling in groups with their peers, than with family. In contrast, females represented a greater

proportion of those aged 25 to 59, the majority married and travelling with family members.

Only a small proportion of all migrants (5%) were aged 60 or over. Migrants commonly explained that elderly people had refused to leave their place of origin either because they were unable or unwilling to make the journey.

Livelihoods and employment prior to departure

Overall, 43% of migrants reported having a stable source on income in their last long term residence, compared to 38% who reported living of unstable income sources. Nearly 10% of those interviewed reported farming as their source of income, whereas 23% reported business and trade.

Syrians, Iraqis and people of other nationalities have tended to be more financially secure than Afghans, who are much more likely to

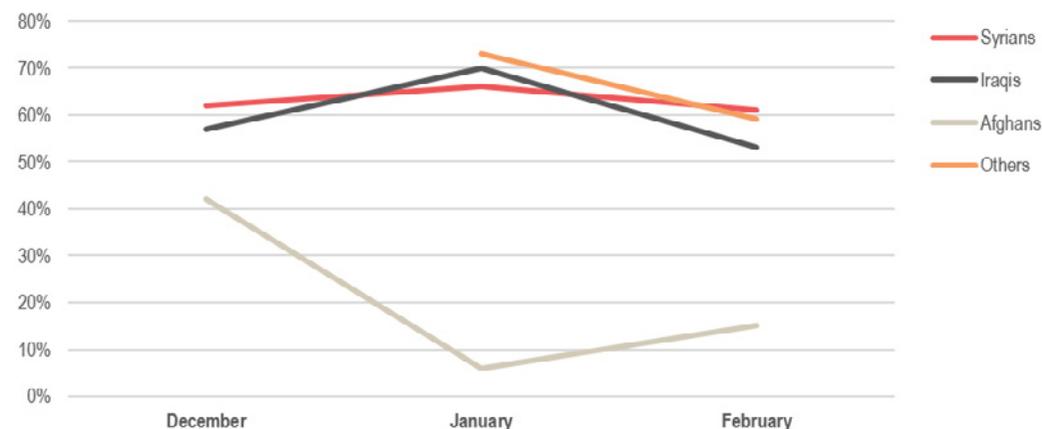
report unstable sources of income in their area of origin. Figure 3, below, shows how the proportion of Syrians, Iraqis and people of other nationalities reporting reliance on stable income has fallen slightly since a peak in January, returning to similar to levels observed in December.

Prices for sea voyage from Turkey to the Greek Islands remained as low as 500 USD per person, similar to figures reported in January. The fall in price since December, when the crossing began from around 850 USD, may have contributed to the slight shift in migrants' socioeconomic background and have enabled migrants with fewer financial resources to arrive in the Western Balkans.³

Education

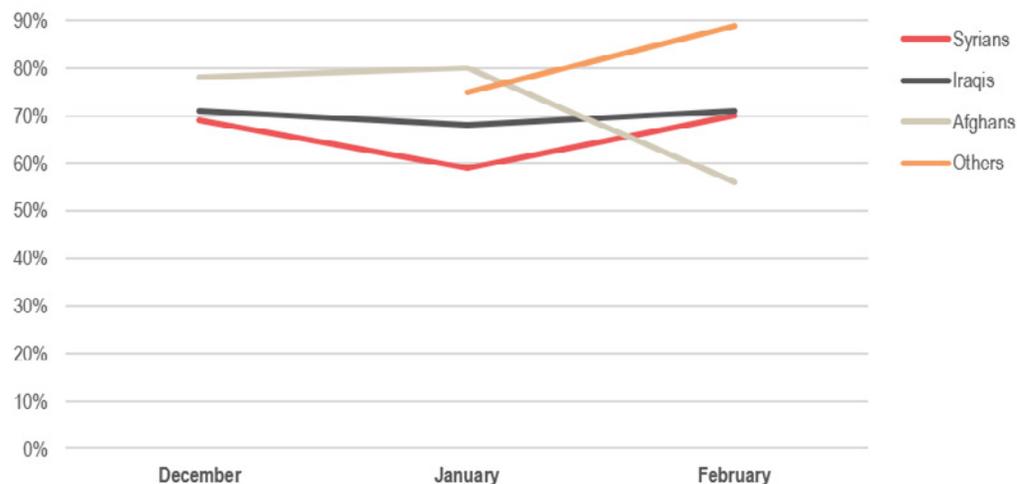
Consistent with reported reliance on stable sources of income in their area of origin, the

Figure 3: Proportion of adults reporting access to a stable income in their area of origin, by nationality, by month



3. REACH social media monitoring

Figure 3: Proportion of adults reporting primary or secondary education, by nationality, by month



large majority of migrants reported having received a formal education. A similar proportion of adults interviewed in February reported having attended primary or secondary education (72%) compared to January (69%) and the proportion of those who have attended university has also registered a slight decrease from 10% in January, to 6% in February.

Of people travelling from Syria, 93% of adults were reported to have at least some basic education, including 23% that reported having attended university. Nearly 7% of adults had no education, the lowest percentage of groups interviewed. Of school aged children from Syria, 99% reported attending school prior to their departure.

Of those from Iraq, 84% of adults reported at least basic education, with 12% indicating they

had attended university. 16% of Iraqi adults reported no education.

Afghans tended to be less educated than their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts, with nearly 39% of adults reporting having no education at all. Children were also less likely to report having accessed education with over a quarter of school aged children (27%) reporting no education at all.

Of those travelling from other countries including North African countries and Iran, 89% of adults reported at least some level of basic education, including 4% that reported having attended university. All children travelling in this group reported having attended school.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

Active armed conflict and general violence and insecurity remain the primary reported push factors, while safety and security continued to be reported as the dominant pull factor for those travelling from Syrian, Iraq and Afghanistan. As in previous months, reasons for leaving generally mirrored the reasons migrants chose for come to Europe.

Push factors

The top three reported push factors remained consistent with previous months. Overall, the primary reason for leaving their area of origin was reported to be active armed conflict and generalised violence and insecurity (71%) while a lack of basic services and lack of income were also commonly cited.

For those travelling from Afghanistan, general violence and insecurity (84%) was the primary reported push factor, representing a

slight decrease since January. While people from Iraq and Syria continued to report active armed conflict as among the primary push factors, reported reasons diversified somewhat compared to previous months, as shown in Figure 4. Lower proportions reported active armed conflict, while higher proportions reported lack of access to basic services and income as push factors.

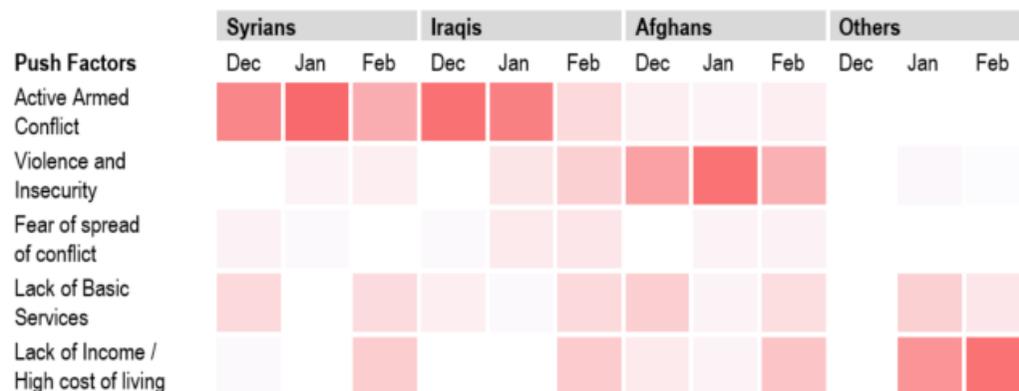
Groups travelling from other countries including Morocco, Algeria and Egypt commonly cited lack of jobs (74%) as their primary motivation for leaving. Other reasons included high cost of living (30%) and lack of basic services (4%).

Pull factors

The presence of safety and security features prominently as the primary reason for travelling to Europe (reported by 71%) and represents an increase since January. Access to services and state support (reported by 33%) and job

Figure 4: Top five reported push factors, by nationality, by month

The darker the colour, the more commonly reported



opportunities (23%) were also commonly reported considerations. The relative importance of job opportunities appears to have increased slightly since January, with 15% reporting this as a primary pull factor compared to 11% the previous month. The proportion reporting family reunification as a pull factor decreased slightly from 22% in January to 20% in February.

Syrians and Afghans generally reported pull factors in the same order of priority; first safety and security, then access to services and state support and job opportunities. In contrast, Iraqis tended to prioritise job opportunities over access to services and state support

Those travelling from other countries listed job opportunities (83%) as their primary pull factor. Access to basic services and state support (32%) was also mentioned, along with reunification with family and friends (2%).

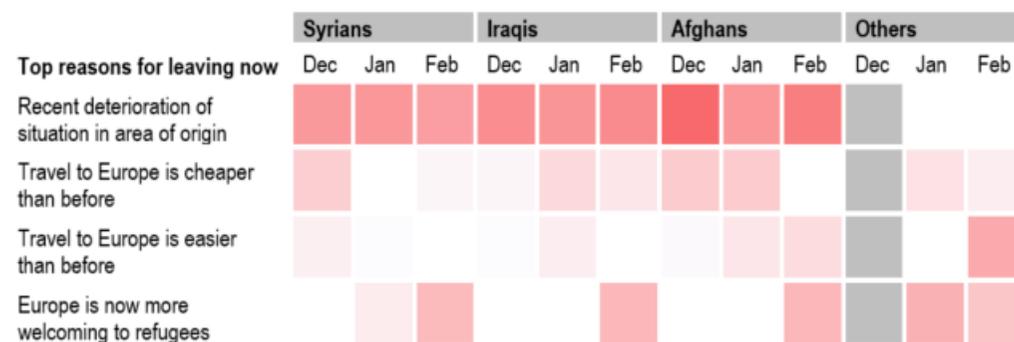
Why travel now?

Overall the reasons given for travelling now, rather than before were primarily reported to be due to a recent deterioration in the situation in the place of origin, reported by 50%. Secondary considerations include that Europe is now perceived as more welcoming to refugees (38%) and that travel to Europe is cheaper (9%). Smaller proportions of migrants reported that it was easier to travel to Europe than before, that they had family and friends in Europe, and that they were afraid that borders would soon close.

When disaggregating information by country

Figure 5: Top three reasons for leaving now, by nationality, by month

The darker the colour, the more commonly reported



of origin, responses were found to vary slightly. On the whole Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis agreed that the primary reason for leaving now is deterioration of the situation at home, and that Europe is considered to be more welcoming to refugees. However, tertiary reasons for travelling now were found to differ between nationalities. Afghans more commonly responded that it was easier to travel now than before, whereas Syrians and Iraqis indicated it was cheaper.

Data collected from Syria supports findings from Serbia and FYROM, with 40% of respondents citing the presence of conflict as a motivating factor for people leaving their communities in the next month. Additional reasons included high cost of living (reported by 40%), lack of income and/or job opportunities (27%), and lack of access to basic services (21%).

Groups travelling from other countries gave different primary reasons—with 47%

responding that it was cheaper to travel now—and different tertiary reasons, with 9% indicating that they had family and friends already in Europe. However, the secondary reason, that “Europe is more welcoming to refugees” was reported by all nationalities.

When reported reasons for leaving are compared over time, as shown in Figure 5, it is clear that the primary motivating factors have remained consistent for each nationality, while secondary factors have changed somewhat since December. The perception that Europe is more welcoming to refugees was much more commonly reported by migrants arriving in February than in December or January, while perceptions of the ease and cost of travel appear to vary, with only Afghans and people of other nationalities reporting that travel to Europe is easier than before. Given that Afghans commonly travel for many weeks and with limited communication, these findings support the hypothesis that news about

the new restrictions will take time to reach migrants starting their journey.

MIGRATION ROUTES

All groups interviewed in February reported transiting through Turkey. As in January, the vast majority came directly from their area of origin (95%), meaning they had not spent more than three months in Turkey. In contrast to previous months where less than around 1% reported spending an extended period in Turkey, 4% of migrants reported spending at least three months in Turkey while a further 1% reported spending three months or more in Lebanon and Iran. **This is the first time since the September assessment that groups reported spending significant time in countries other than Turkey.**

In February, delays and push backs had significant effects on travel across the Western Balkans, affecting much larger proportions of those travelling than in December or March. During the first half of the month, groups continued to travel to Serbia via two routes: the land route through Bulgaria, and the sea route across the Aegean to Greece and through FYROM to Serbia. Transiting through Serbia on towards wider Europe. Smaller numbers arrived from Bulgaria, and on 21 February, Serbia suspended the registration centre in Dimitriovgrad and required that all migrants entering Serbia from Bulgaria first register at the Presevo One Stop Centre, before making their way across Serbia towards Croatia.

The majority of groups interviewed (88%)

intended to reach Germany as their final destination. Other locations included France and Italy (10%), likely influenced by the larger proportion of those from other nationalities; Sweden (5%), Belgium (4%), Austria (2%), Holland (2%) and Norway (1%). The decreasing proportion of migrants reporting destinations such as Sweden, which were previously much more popular, is likely to be influenced by restrictions implemented in January, where migrants were required to state their intended destination upon registration, with only those stating Germany or Austria allowed to continue their journey.

PROTECTION CONCERNS

Border push backs and the emergence of stranded populations

Stranded populations emerged as a group with increasing protection concerns in February. The first two weeks of February saw significant delays affecting all migrants at borders, with waiting times of between 2 to 7 days. Major bottle necks were located at the Greece/FYROM border and the border of Serbia and Croatia.

The second part of February saw the introduction of stricter policies, including groups from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan that previously passed through border checks without delay. Newly established criteria included a detailed list of 'safe locations' within Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan from which people were not accepted. Other reasons for border push backs included security

concerns related to migrants' area of origin; errors or inconsistencies between registration documents; and that documents issued in Greece were out of date.⁴ In addition, individuals whose passports indicated they had spent more than 30 days in Turkey, Greece of FYROM were also denied entry. Others reported that they were rejected at the border because their children's names were not on the registration paper; they had no Greek documentation; a stamp was missing for a child; or that they had attempted to cross the border more than once.⁵

UNHCR also reported border push backs in FYROM from Vinojug to the border with Greece due to discrepancies between the Greek registration document and other identification documents despite previous validation at the border.

On 21 February, several countries in the Western Balkans officially closed the border to Afghans, following the lead of FYROM. A few days later the 19-point agreement was made in Austria, limiting the number of migrants able to cross through the Western Balkans and imposing a daily quota on the number of asylum applications, tightening border criteria and refusing entry to many without proper documentation. Despite the suspension of migrant registration in Dimitriovgrad, Serbia following a decision taken by government authorities, migrants continued to arrive in Šid from the border with Bulgaria. These migrants were unaware of new policies and as a result, lacked the necessary registration papers to



Image 1: IDP transit site at Tabanovatsë, FYROM

continue their journey by official routes. Afghan males represented the majority of those interviewed travelling from Dimitriovgrad, on average having travelled for over a month, with limited access to information along the route.

In the second half of February, transit camps became increasingly overcrowded, particularly at exit points along the Western Balkans, as migrants were informed of new policies that had been implemented while they were travelling. For those travelling from Afghanistan or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, access to information

is often particularly difficult, since information is generally available only in Arabic, English and local languages, with limited Farsi or Kurdish-speaking translators present in transit sites.

Changing needs in transit sites

For those currently stranded along the Western Balkans, needs have shifted from short-term lodging, food and non-food items such as shoes and jackets in December and January, to longer-term shelter, adequate hygiene facilities (toilets and bathing facilities) and health care which was increasingly reported in

⁴ This finding was also reported in UNHCR, FYR Macedonia Inter-Agency Operation al Update, 26 February-3 March 2016

⁵ Ibid

mid-February. The failure to provide adequate conditions has reportedly led to outbreaks of disease, while cold weather, inadequate shelter and insufficient access to washing and hygiene facilities have all exacerbated health problems.⁵ REACH teams visiting transit sites reported observing many children coughing or sick with minor illnesses, while a lack of access to healthcare was a frequent complaint among migrants, particularly at the Refugee Aid Point in Sid, Serbia.

As in January, migrants from countries other than Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan continue to be denied access to registration centres in Presevo and as a result cannot access protections services on offer there.⁶ Populations in Belgrade, a primary hub for those seeking alternative routes, also represent a particularly vulnerable group, with significant numbers sleeping in the open air in parks, at train stations and on the street, with limited access to assistance. Aid actors in Belgrade report treating cases of injury sustained by migrants in transit, which are consistent with reports of violence by criminal groups, smugglers and police.⁷ Migrants in Belgrade also include a larger proportion of unaccompanied minors, primarily from Afghanistan and other countries, who represent a particularly vulnerable group.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, migrant profiles travelling through the Western Balkans have shifted slightly, with an increasing number of groups travelling from 'other' countries such as

Morocco, Algeria and Egypt. These groups are visible in Belgrade and often at exit points, but do not tend to arrive in Serbia through official border points.

Males continue to represent the majority of travelers overall, although group composition has been found to vary considerably according to nationality. Groups from Syria and Iraq consist primarily of families, while single males travelling alone make up the large majority of those travelling from Afghanistan and 'other' countries. On the whole, the majority of those travelling through Serbia and FYROM were middle income families with a basic level of education, travelling in an average group size of six.

Reported push and pull factors for migration have largely remained consistent with previous months. Active armed conflict and generalised violence and insecurity have continued to motivate people to flee their area of origin, while safety and security remained the primary pull factor for migrants travelling to Europe. As with the demographic profile of those travelling, important differences can also be observed between the push and pull factors reported by different nationalities, with people travelling from Syria and Iraq more likely to be reporting fleeing active armed conflict than those from Afghanistan and other countries.

Motivations for choosing to travel to Europe now rather than before continue to include the recent deterioration of the situation, Europe's perceived welcoming attitude towards refugees and the comparative ease of travelling.

People interviewed in February had commonly experienced delays and push backs along the Western Balkans migration route, which were increasing journey times. Significant bottle necks appeared at exit points in Greece, FYROM and Serbia, while traffic at entry points was limited by daily quotas limiting the number of migrants that could pass through the border. The imposition of daily quotas created a cascade effect, where countries scrambled to implement consistent policies one after another. This resulted in increasing blockages further back along the route, leading to overcrowding at exit points and creating frustration on the part of migrants.

The implementation of new quotas and increasing restrictions, often with little warning, has led the overall transit time through the Western Balkans to increase. In many cases the journey from Greece to Austria and Germany has more than doubled, leading to changing humanitarian needs, particularly for the increasing numbers of stranded migrants, who are left with no legal means of continuing their journey and are increasingly resorting to smuggling.

In addition to changing vulnerability as a result of new restrictions on entry and transit, the lack of information available to migrants about these changes has prevented many from understanding their circumstances, and feeling frustrated towards authorities who "would not let them pass". This is particularly true for those travelling from Afghanistan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who often

do not speak Arabic and have little access to information in their mother tongue, either through printed resources or translators.

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 our in-country office: iraq@reach-initiative.org or to our global office: geneva@reach-initiative.org.

Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info.

⁵ Associated Press, Rough seas, harsh winter, border limits add to migrant woes, February 2016

⁶ MSF, EU Migration Crisis Update, 24 February 2016.

⁷ Ibid.