Analytical Report

THE WESTERN BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE (2015–2019)

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the Western Balkan region mainly represents a transit zone for refugees and migrants from the Middle East, West and South Asia and Africa aiming to reach Western and Northern Europe. Almost one million people crossed the Western Balkans (WB) to enter the EU in 2015-16[1].

The official 'closure' of the route in March 2016 reduced the migrant and refugee flows significantly, without halting them entirely. It rather resulted in increased numbers of 'stranded' migrants and asylum seekers who were detained, or whose journey was delayed, causing them to stay in their intended transit countries for several months or even longer. More recently, the channelling of migrants towards Bosnia and Herzegovina brought additional challenges to an already vulnerable and institutionally weak state. Whereas the EU support has been limited, the local population has perceived it as designed to keep people stranded in the WB for as long as possible.

The aim of this Report is to assess the recent migration flows across the WB using available statistical data[2] from national and international sources. The Report will present a brief chronology of events since 2015 and introduce some country-specific data before providing concrete policy recommendations and conclusions. The selection of the countries and their order corresponds to the number of people received during the period covered by the report.

This Report calls for the establishment of a regionally coordinated response in order to:

✓   assist and protect migrants;
✓   improve search and rescue capacities in coastal regions;
✓   ensure solidarity for the main countries of destination;
✓   ensure access to legal pathways, resettlement schemes, family reunification, labour migration, education programmes and better protection for children and women, especially when subjected to abuse or violence;
✓   ensure proper measures for the prosecution of smugglers and traffickers.

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[1] See: www.unhcr.org/en-my/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html
[2] It should be emphasised that this report is not free from challenges that are common to migration data, i.e. lack of coverage and reliability. Moreover, the data is not harmonised between the different countries included in the analysis, which makes their comparison difficult. There were limited attempts to harmonize the data with the EU Regulation 862/2007 in some countries (i.e. Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), but there still remains considerable work in this respect.

CURRENT CONTEXT

The culmination of the financial crisis (2008) and the Arab Spring (2010) both had knock-on effects for mixed migration to Europe. Since 2009, an estimated 3.4 million people have entered the EU irregularly[3], constituting the largest movement of people across Europe since the end of World War II. The situation was further exacerbated by the conflicts and civil unrest in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, forcing populations to flee toward Europe in search of safety. Alongside these countries, refugees and other migrants coming to Europe typically hailed from Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Libya, as well as other North and Sub-Saharan African States. The EU Member States (EU MS) have been unable to formulate a common asylum policy, although certain steps have been taken to better manage the "migration crisis" such as restricting border crossings, strengthening institutional capacities, providing humanitarian aid and engaging in diplomacy with countries of origin[4]. These actions have led to a significant decrease in the number of people arriving irregularly, from 1.8 million people in 2015, to 206,000 in 2017 and 144,166 in 2018[5].

Over one million refugees used the Balkan route to proceed to Austria, Germany and Sweden with some 578,000 registering in Serbia on their way (UNHCR Belgrade Office, 2015). These figures represent a mere estimate. Assuming that approximately two thirds of migrants registered in the transit countries, the actual numbers are probably much higher (Bernec & Selo-Sabic, 2016). The Balkan and Mediterranean corridors remain busy migration routes until the present.

The signing of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016[6] aimed at preventing the passage of migrants from Turkey to Europe and contributed significantly to the 'closing' of the Balkan route and the drastic decrease in the number of people attempting to enter the EU. At the same time, the stricter border controls led to many more transit migrants being stranded in the WB. Whereas politicians swiftly proclaimed that the WB route had been 'closed', recent statistics and reports indicate it has been frequented a lot, with the flows increasing again as of early 2019[7]. The migrants' decision to opt for this route has depended on various factors, including the number of people travelling, their presumed nationality, itineraries and desired destination, demographic profile, but also the duration of stay, as well as the competent authorities and the organisations trying to support them.

MANAGING THE BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE

The migration corridor established in spring 2015 enabled third-country nationals to cross the WB on their way from Greece to Western Europe. The flows through the region increased dramatically until the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016 and the introduction of new border restrictions by Hungary, Croatia, Serbia and North Macedonia. The extent to which the "migration crisis" affected the WB countries is illustrated below. At the time, policy changes culminated in four main phases that chart the transformation of the route.
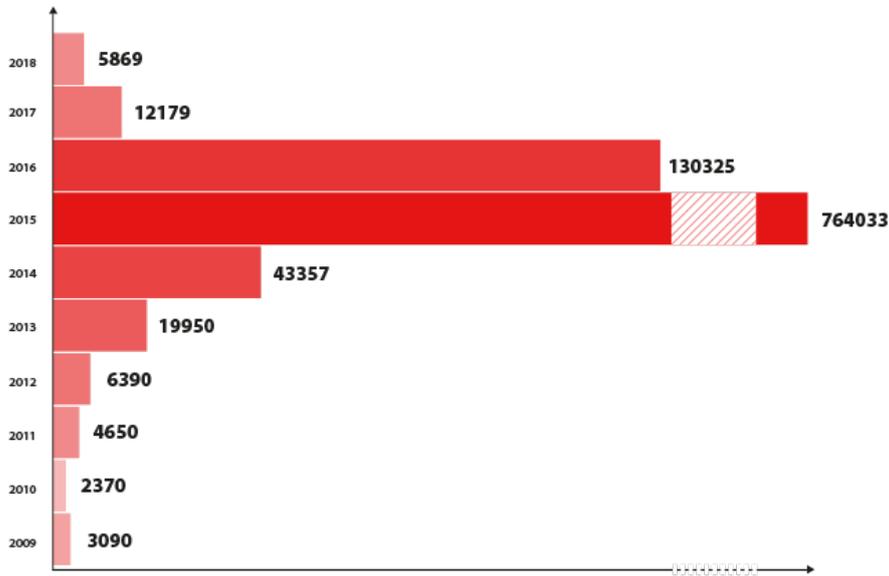
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[3] See: https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/
[4] See: www.nationalinterest.org/feature/how-europe-dealt-migration-37577
[5] See: https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/; https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals
[6] EU–Turkey Statement: Questions and Answers", Brussels 19 March 2016. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16–963_en.htm.
[7] See: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-data-and-trend-analysis-regional-overview-january

Figure 1. Illegal border crossings for the Western Balkans countries, 2009-2017

Note: The break in column for 2015 is for presentation purpose, but it should be noted that the actual figure is 7 times larger than for example in 2014, Source: FRONTEX, 2019

Figure 2. The Western Balkan Route
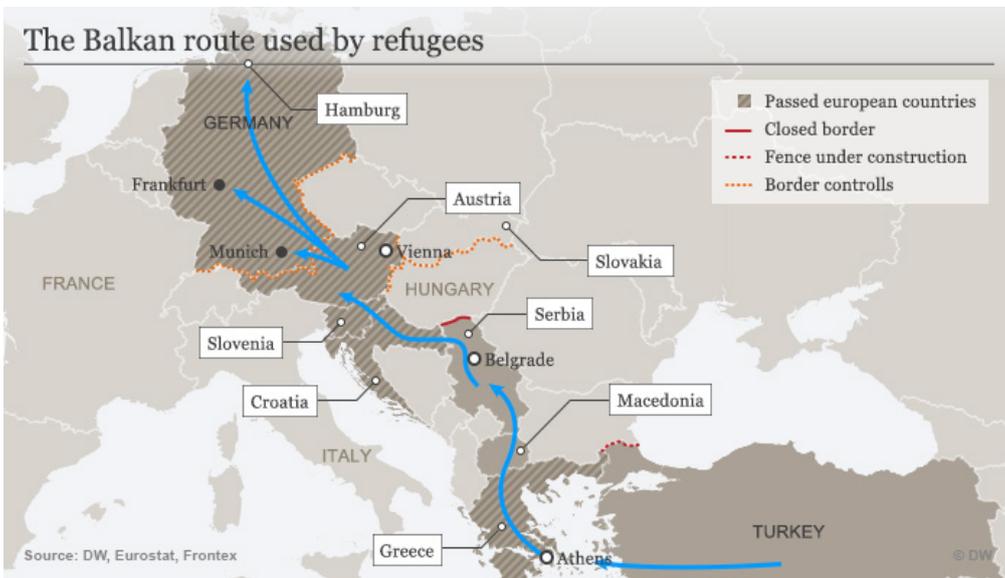
* Macedonia = North Macedonia;
** "European Countries" = EU countries;
*** Kosovo is under UN 1244 resolution
Source: DW, 2015

First Phase

As of 2015, the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Turkey and subsequently into Greece increased significantly, with most aiming to move northwards through the Balkans. After the initial shock and the witnessed unpreparedness to manage these large flows of people in such short time, the countries along the route managed to receive the migrants, provide them with shelter and food and address their immediate needs. The first reception centre in Serbia opened in July 2015 in Preševo, close to the border with North Macedonia. It served as the main registration point of migrants along the route. Its opening was crucial as an increasing number of migrants required humanitarian support.

The numbers of migrants present in Serbia increased not only along the border with North Macedonia but also in the Serbian municipalities bordering Hungary, from where uncontrolled border crossings into Hungary took place. In response, another reception centre opened in Kanjiža in August 2015. As the number of transit migrants in Serbia continued to rise, Belgrade became a central hub along the route where the people on the move could rest and obtain information about the onward journey. During this first phase, around 1,000 migrants frequented the parks in the city centre on a daily basis. As most people continued their journey towards Hungary and Western Europe, their stay in Serbia was limited to a few days.

Second Phase

While North Macedonia amended its Asylum Law in a way to allow for the facilitated transit (mainly by trains and buses) through its territory, the Hungarian authorities responded to the increased flows by erecting the first part of a double fence along the border with Serbia. It had an immediate effect on the onward migration route, which shifted to Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. The highly contested wall, which appeared in response to the uncontrolled movement of people, thus led to the erection of several more walls along the route - between Hungary and Croatia, Slovenia and Croatia, North Macedonia and Greece, as well as Austria and Slovenia. In addition, some countries along the route responded by occasional shutdowns of their own borders. This uncoordinated approach culminated in a disagreement between Serbia and Croatia and the full closure of their mutual border[8]. As the route shifted towards Croatia, its government responded by arranging the transport of the migrants passing through, rather than allowing them to move freely across the country.

Angela Merkel's decision to allow Syrians to apply for asylum in Germany in spite of having entered the EU through another Member State resulted in a record number of people on the move and turned Germany into the main destination for asylum seekers in Europe[9]. In October 2015, more than 180,000 people were registered in the reception centre in Preševo (Serbia) with over 10,000 crossings in the most frequent days, making this centre the most important point of registration along the route (Santic et all, 2016).

During this phase, the EU adopted an Emergency Relocation Plan, which aimed to relocate up to 160,000 refugees (mainly Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis) from Italy and Greece to other member states over a period of two years[10]. As the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) rejected this plan, only 35,000 people were relocated under this plan by 2019[11].

The only document to involve the WB states in the plans of the EU - the "17-point Plan of Action"[12]- stated that the challenges faced along the Balkan migration route cannot be solved through national actions, but only through a collective, cross-border effort. The WB states agreed to improve their cooperation and launch

[8] Croatia accused Serbia of scarce cooperation and of passing the problem to Croatia, when around 44,000 migrants entered Croatia in a single week (Benedetti, 2017).
This situation grew into a so-called "trade war" between the two countries that lasted for five days during September 2015.
[9] See: https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/06/europe/angela-merkel-migration-germany-intl/index.html
[10] See: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_solidarity_a_refugee_relocation_system_en.pdf
[11] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190306_managing-migration-factsheet-step-change-migration-management-border-security-timeline_en.pdf
[12] See: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-is-new/news/news/2015/20151026_1_en

joint consultations, which resulted in pragmatic operational measures for immediate implementation. The Action plan recognized the need for continuous exchange of information between the countries concerned, especially in view of the approaching winter period and the joint will to avoid a humanitarian crisis. The Declaration specifically named Serbia and North Macedonia as the transit countries in need of greatest assistance. While it also called for the relocation of 50,000 people along the route, the specific obligations of each state were not concretised (Petronijević, 2017; Velimirović, 2018).

Third Phase

Since 2015, the public discourse and media coverage on migration into Europe has become ever harsher. Not only did the public and the media question Europe's overall response to the incoming migration, but also the acceptance of migrants in principle. Unsurprisingly, the media coverage across the EU focused on assessing the crisis of Europe's borders[13], the 'assault' on Europe facilitated by an 'open door' migration policy[14] and the fear of terrorism resulting from it. Anti-migrant sentiments became stronger across the EU and the WB states. The policy makers reacted by introducing new restrictive measures across Europe. On 24 February 2016, the Chiefs of Police of all countries along the Balkan route endorsed the Declaration 'Managing Migration Together', which resulted in the 'closure' of the route in March 2016. Perceived as a contravention of international refugee law and human rights (Petronijevic, 2017), this Declaration called for common standards of registration and a strict application of entry criteria. It resulted in the introduction of quotas, first by Austria and then by all other countries along the route.

Fourth Phase

The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 significantly reduced the number of migrants arriving to the EU and crossing through the Balkans. The closing of the borders, however, resulted in an increase in human smuggling, which exposed the lack of control, while also raising various human rights concerns (Santic et al, 2017). The WB thus ended up as a buffer zone between Greece and Bulgaria on the one side, and Hungary and Croatia, which had decided to close their borders entirely, on the other. These were all EU Member States. The relatively unstable political situation in the Balkans, the changing conditions in the countries of origin and the emergence or disappearance of alternative routes (e.g. Central Mediterranean route via Libya and the Western Mediterranean via Morocco) all had an impact on the migration witnessed along the Balkan route.

As of March 2016, the dependency of migrants on human smugglers increased, creating new geographies of informal mobility and keeping the Balkan Route frequented (Minca et al, 2019). Given the new circumstances, the migrants changed the route several times, at first passing through Bulgaria and Romania, before shifting to Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina as of 2018. The number of people accommodated in reception centres, unofficial shelters or externally across the WB countries in the second quarter of 2018 was estimated at around 8,500. The share of children among the transiting migrants fluctuated between 19% and 32%. The share of unaccompanied minors among these children varied between countries, ranging from 8% in North Macedonia to 52% in Serbia. The vast majority of unaccompanied minors were boys from Afghanistan and Pakistan[15].

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[13] See: www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34850310
[14] See: www.businessinsider.com/how-paris-attacks-affect-refugee-policy-2015-11
[15] See: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13794/pdf/sc_bmdh_data_regional_overview_april-june_2018_web.pdf p.2

In 2018, the total number of irregular migrants officially registered by the authorities in the WB countries amounted to 61,012, representing a five-fold increase as compared to the 13,216 persons registered in 2017. The most significant increase occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 23,848 migrants registered in 2018. This figure was 20 times higher than in 2017 and twice as much as for all other WB countries combined[16]. Those migrants registered in 2017 and 2018 used more diverse routes, often registering in more than one transit country. The increase in the number of people moving through Albania and Montenegro, which were not affected in 2016, shows how the route changed since mid-2017[17]. The surge in migration flows has been accompanied by more frequent reports of pushbacks, violence and physical abuse at the borders. This has not dissuaded the thousands of people on the move to continue their journey into Europe. Civil society organisations have reported of vigilante groups participating in pushback incidents against asylum seekers along the Serbian-Hungarian border (APC, 2016), as well as multiple cases of violence in which migrants trying to enter Hungary – including women and children – were beaten, threatened and exposed to humiliating practices before eventually being pushed back to Serbia[18].

POLICY RESPONSES

The policy response to the emerging migration situation along the WB route was predominantly a national one, with very little coordination among the affected states. Initial policy responses were primarily motivated by reducing inflows, without regard to the impact on other countries. For example, the Croatian President stated that "a little bit of force is needed when doing pushbacks" of asylum-seekers and migrants attempting to cross into Croatia from neighboring Bosnia. Previously, Croatia's Ministry of Interior denied various reports of ill-treatment of refugees along the border an of pushbacks practices by Croatian border police, both in violation of EU and international refugee law[19]. This section analyses the situation and policy response in each country throughout the four stages outlined above.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia was the first WB country to face the mass inflows of migrants. Until 2010, most of the people entering the country had been from former Yugoslavia, Albania and Turkey. Since then, however, ever more asylum-seekers from outside the region - primarily from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia – arrived to North Macedonia. As of 2015, Syria and Iraq turned into the prime countries of origin. Previously, transit migration through North Macedonia had neither been visible, nor publicly debated.

Table 1. Number of asylum applications filed in North Macedonia per year

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015 (1st half)
744	638	1,353	1,289	1,446

While 80% of applicants were single men (18-35 years of age), the number of unaccompanied minors was also significant[20]. Throughout 2015 and early 2016, several hundred thousand migrants transited North Macedonia. As the registering of people only began on 19 June 2015, their total number remains unknown. UNHCR began monitoring the border crossings from Greece (in Gevgelija) as of 1 July 2015, providing shelter and basic humanitarian services. Until the end of 2015, nearly 700.000 migrants are estimated to have passed through. The number of daily arrivals ranged between 5,000 and 10,000.[21] Initially, the police forces

[16] https://rovienna.iom.int/story/new-data-population-movements-western-balkans
[17] Ibid
[18] https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-november-monthly-focus-hate-crime_en.pdf p.8
[19] https://www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/the-refugee-brief-15-july-2019/
[20] See: www.refworld.org/pdfid/55c9c70e4.pdf
[21] See: www.irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/At-the-Gate-of-Europe_WEB.pdf. p.5

only managed to register one third to half of the newcomers. As of December 2015, the detection system was fully functional, recording all people on the move.

North Macedonia remained purely a transit country with (almost) all migrants leaving the country after a short stayover. The camp in Gevgelija provided places to rest, toilets and water taps. Humanitarian organizations provided food and the Red Cross first aid[22]. Before crossing the border into Serbia, the migrants usually stopped in Lojane and Vaksince, two villages known for their informal migrant camps, which, according to witnesses, were operated by the very human smugglers[23].

In spite of some improvements, UNHCR observed that "significant weaknesses persist in the asylum system in practice" and that North Macedonia "has not been able to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to a fair and efficient asylum procedure" (UNHCR North Macedonia 2015: 21).

In August 2015, the North Macedonian government decided to temporarily close its southern border completely and declared a state of emergency. This measure served to increase the pressure on the EU and the international community to provide more assistance and financial support to the country. After reopening the border, the transit through North Macedonia was coordinated by the Crisis Management Centre, becoming more orderly (Beznec et al, 2016).

In March 2016, the EU-Turkey Agreement came into effect. In response, North Macedonia again closed its border to Greece, thereby triggering a domino effect in terms of new restrictions. The sudden and permanent closure of the border further resulted in the setting up of a large improvised camp in Idomeni, Greece, hosting up to 15,000 migrants. The closure of the WB corridor left some 1,600 people stranded in North Macedonia.

Table 2. Key mixed migration statistics for North Macedonia

North Macedonia	Irregular border crossings	Number of irregular migrants present in the country	People registered at immigration centres	Certificates of intention to seek asylum	Number of approved asylum applications
2014	-	-	-	1,289	13
2015	750,000	-	317,507	435,907	3
2016	-	130	-	89,152	6
2017	-	79	-	147 (162 people)	-

Source: International Organization for Migration, "Migration Flows – Europe", 2018

In North Macedonia, asylum applicants are immediately transferred to the reception centres in Skopje, Vizbegovo and Gazi Baba, where the asylum interviews are conducted. In 2017, 147 of 162 asylum applications were assessed positively. In 2018, 1,518 migrants crossed the country with 95 of them accommodated[24].

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[22] See: www.irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/At-the-Gate-of-Europe_WEB.pdf. p.5
[23] Beznec et al (2016) 'Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime', p.17
[24] See: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15187/pdf/refugees_and_migrants_balkans_regional_overview_q4_2018_sc_bmdh_data.pdf

Serbia

Serbia has been harmonising its migration legislation to the respective EU acquis. The visa liberalization and opening of negotiation chapters for EU accession required the elaboration of certain legal acts for managing asylum and transit migration. The flows experienced at the peak of the 'migration crisis' equally resulted in a series of legal acts. Most important perhaps was the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection of 2018[25]. Already in June 2015, the so-called Mixed Migration Working Group was established, bringing together all relevant Ministries and stakeholders[26]. Its main tasks were to facilitate the inter-institutional coordination for the reception and transit of migrants, improve the registration system and address the basic humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable. The setting up of new centres and improvement of existing ones, the provision of health care services, food and non-food items, and adequate sanitation also figured among the immediate priorities to be addressed.

The *Action Plan in case of increased migrant inflows* of September 2015 identified the competent authorities, organizations and institutions and their concrete tasks in case of a mass influx, as well as the appropriate measures and necessary resources. Several international organisations (e.g. IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF) and local NGOs assisted migrants from the onset of the crisis. They did so in coordination with the government institutions and local communities.

Table 3: Number of asylum applications in Serbia, 2008–2015

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2008													**77**
2009	4	4	21	19	35	26	35	21	26	22	17	45	**275**
2010	27	18	36	36	37	35	17	38	57	68	92	61	**522**
2011	97	140	205	251	283	397	342	419	375	219	240	164	**3132**
2012	199	64	115	108	227	261	238	242	352	358	334	225	**2723**
2013	157	193	381	490	370	272	369	335	627	651	607	614	**5066**
2014	943	596	516	651	761	790	1170	1547	1524	2353	2201	3438	**16490**
2015*	2425	2537	3761	4425	9034	15209	29037	37463	51048	180307	149923	92826	**577995**

* Data for 2015 are certificates of expression of the intention to seek asylum; Source: Ministry of Interior, Serbia

According to official data, 577,995[27] migrants crossed Serbia in 2015. The monthly numbers varied depending on the newest national regulations, the latest restrictive measures introduced by EU Member States or the closing of borders. October 2015 recorded a peak of 180,307 people crossing the country, when up to 10,000 migrants entered Serbia on a daily basis.

In January and February 2016, 96,236 people, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Pakistan, crossed Serbia with a 'certificate of expression of intention to seek asylum' (Migration profile, 2017:44)[28]. Following the closure of the route, only 12,811 more certificates were issued for the rest of 2016, representing a mere 2% of the 2015 figures. Only 577 migrants (3%) actually applied for asylum with almost half of

[25] Among the most important laws related to migration management, which represent a significant step towards aligning with EU acquis, are the Law on State Border Protection (2008), the Law on Migration Management (2012), Law on Employment of Foreigners (2014) and others. Also, there are relevant strategies that Serbia adopted such as: Strategy for Combating Illegal Migration for the period 2009-2014 (2009) and 2017-2020 (2017), Migration Management Strategy (2009), Strategy for Integrated Border Management (2006) and Reintegration Strategy under the Readmission Agreement (2009), together with referral action plans. In this vein, Serbia has been prepared for opening of Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), which includes sections on asylum, migration, visa regime, external borders and the Schengen Area.[17] Ibid
[26] These included the Ministries of Interior, Labour, Health, Foreign Affairs and EU Integration, as well as the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and the EU Delegation.
[27] Estimates vary on the volume of migrants transiting along the Balkan route in 2015: the European Parliament provided an estimation of 596,000, the UNHCR of 815,000, and the IOM of 639,152 people. According to FRONTEX, there were 885,000 irregular border crossings in 2015 (Minca & Rijke, 2017). The real numbers are most probably larger because estimates indicate that only two thirds of all migrants have been registered upon their arrival in transit countries (Šelo-Šabić and Borić 2015).
[28] The 'certificate of entry in to the territory of Republic of Serbia for migrants' was officially published in Official Gazette RS No. 81 from 24 September 2015, but it was enacted somewhat later. This certificate was issued by the Ministry of Interior at the borders when migrants entered the country or if they were found without it while residing in the country.

their applications (267) suspended later on. Eventually, 19 people received protection in Serbia (Migration profile, 2016) while the vast majority of asylum seekers travelled onwards to the EU without completing their asylum procedures.

In 2017, there were 6,195 intentions to seek asylum, as compared to the nearly 100,000 of 2016 (Ministry of Interior, 2018). In 2017, some 4,000 migrants were placed in asylum and reception centres across Serbia[29].

The socioeconomic status, gender and age profile of the incoming migrants gradually shifted from richer, more educated men aged 18-35, to poorer, less educated individuals featuring a larger share of women, children and elderly people. In 2018, the following composition was registered: Afghanistan (51.57%), Pakistan (17.44%), Iraq (14.72%), Iran (7.36%) and Syria (1.73%) (SCRM, 2018). Whereas the migrants initially used to travel individually, they later appeared in groups of five to fifteen people (Mandić, 2017).

The Serbian government established numerous camps in key locations along the transit route, which are connected but also quite diverse. While some were called 'reception centres', others merely constituted 'transit centres'. Many facilities (e.g. along the borders) were closed when no longer needed. In theory, Serbia has a capacity to temporarily host some 5,665 refugees (Table 3). The centres shall provide the incoming migrants with food, clothes and medical services. When the stay lasts for over six months, the asylum seekers are also entitled to a kindergarten, language classes, entertainment and sport activities. These centres usually accommodate families and women, with a smaller contingent of single young men.

Table 4. List of migrant reception centres and their capacity, Serbia

Transit reception centres	Capacities	Asylum Centres	Capacities
Preševo	1,000	Sjenica	250
Vranje	245	Bogovadja	170
Bujanovac	220	Banja Koviljača	100
Pirot	250	Tutin	80
Dimitrovgrad	90	**Subtotal**	**600**
Bosilegrad	60		
Divljana	300		
Šid area (Principovac and Adaševci)	700		
Obrenovac	750		
Kikinda	240		
Sombor	160		
Krnjača	900		
Subotica	150		
Subtotal	**5,065**	**Total capacity**	**5,665**

Source: Minca et al, 2019.

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[29] See: www.kirs.gov.rs

While most of the affected Balkan countries and EU member states (Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary) focused their efforts on border controls, deportation and integration, Serbia adopted a humanitarian response. The integration of stranded migrants or those who remained in Serbia voluntarily has been very challenging (e.g. enrolling children into schools). In terms of the number of stranded refugees, Serbia has become the second most important hub along the Balkan route after Greece. Primarily a transit country, it continues to represent only an accidental or temporary destination for those on the move. The arrival of Iranians under the short-lived visa reciprocity agreement between Iran and Serbia is also worth mentioning in this respect.

Croatia

The national crisis management measures featured the provision of immediate care and other assistance by the state as well as by civil society, religious and humanitarian organizations and new solidarity initiatives. While this humanitarian response was predominant at the beginning, the gradual closure of the Balkan corridor brought an increased radicalization and securitization as well as a 'securitization discomfort'[30] among pro-refugee actors (Zuparic-Iljic and Valenta, 2019).

Table 5. Key mixed migration statistics for Croatia

Year	Irregular border crossings	People residing at immigration centres	Asylum applications	Number of approved asylum applications
2014	3,914	434	1,008	16
2015	559,510	283	261	36
2016	102,307	584	2,234	83
2017	4,808	645	1,887	185

Source: Croatian Ministry of Interior

According to the Croatian Ministry of Interior, around 77% of asylum applications were cancelled because the applicants had left Croatia[31]. This shows that Croatia, similar to the other WB countries, is primarily a transit country.

The total number of illegal border crossings in Croatia dropped from 4,734 in 2013 to 3,914 in 2014. The main countries of origin of the irregular migrants were Syria, Albania and Afghanistan[32]. In 2015, the number increased dramatically to 559,510 illegal border crossings, with nationals of Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Iran having the biggest shares.[33]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Until recently, BiH was not part of the Balkan route with only few migrants passing through Albania, Montenegro and BiH in 2015 and 2016. Following the closure of the Hungarian and Bulgarian borders to Serbia, however, migrants stranded in Serbia and North Macedonia increasingly opted to continue their

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[30] The term "securitization discomfort" was described by Zuparic-Iljic and Valenta (2019) as an organizational discomfort and disagreement among non-state actors by the shift of Croatian government's policy towards a securitization strategy, whereby the refugees' benefits, rights and needs are being neglected.
[31] See: www.24sata.hr/news/svi-kojima-je-odobren-azil-u-hrvatskoj-su-boravili-zakonito-554596
[32] See: www.mup.hr/public/documents/Planovi%20i%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87a%20rada/Izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20ministra%20unutarnjih%20poslova%20o%20obavljanju%20policijskih%20poslova%20u%202014.%20godini.pdf
[33] See: www.sabor.hr/izvjesce-ministra-up-o-obavljanju-policijskih

journey through these countries. Consequently, they faced similar challenges as their neighbours along the initial Balkan route. The following table illustrates the shifting route by comparing the years 2017 and 2018. In 2018, BiH recorded some 24,100 transit migrants[34], representing a significant challenge to the country. Prior to the construction of camps, the migrants were forced to find shelter in abandoned buildings and scattered tent settlements. Nonetheless, the Croatian border guards have sealed the border, pushing back all migrants arriving irregularly from BiH[35].

By the end of 2019, the Bosnian authorities registered 29,196 refugees and migrants (21% increase as compared to 2018). Whilst some 95% of the newly arrived submitted their intention to seek asylum, less than 3% (784 persons) effectively registered their claims with the Sector for Asylum[36]. According to UNHCR, the short application deadlines and limited state capacities to process incoming asylum claims have limited the overall access to an asylum procedure[37].

Table 6. Key mixed migration statistics for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Year	Irregular border crossings	Number of registered arrivals of migrant	People residing at immigration centres	Asylum applications	Number of approved asylum applications
2014	189	-	218	45	45
2015	179	-	193	46	42
2016	218	-	311	79	66
2017	766	-	860	381	340
2018	-	21,163	-	19,986	1,314

Source: BiH Ministry of Security, BiH Migration Profile 2018

The available statistics illustrate the sharp increase in the number of migrants experienced in 2018, with most migrants coming from Pakistan (6,910), Iran (3,373), Syria (2,529), Afghanistan (2,431), Iraq (1,874) and Libya (760)[38]. In spite of the almost 20,000 filed intentions to seek asylum only 1,314 individuals effectively submitted an asylum application. The process for obtaining asylum is similar as in North Macedonia and Serbia[39]. Some 3,000 individuals were accommodated in reception centres and unofficial shelters throughout 2018.

In 2018, a total of 61,012 irregular migrants were officially registered along the Balkan route, as compared to 13,216 in 2017. BiH experienced the most significant increase with 23,848 individuals registered in 2018 as compared to the 1,116 in 2017. At the end of 2018, an estimated 9,528 migrants and asylum seekers were residing in different reception facilities across the region. 88% were accommodated in centres across BiH and Serbia. Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan represented the main countries of origin, followed by Algeria, Morocco and the WB countries themselves.

In 2019, there were one state-managed asylum center and six temporary accommodation centers, leaving thousands of migrants without access to shelter and basic services[40].

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[34] See: https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/
[35] See: https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-struggling-flood-migrants-other-balkan-routes-shut-down/29448610.html
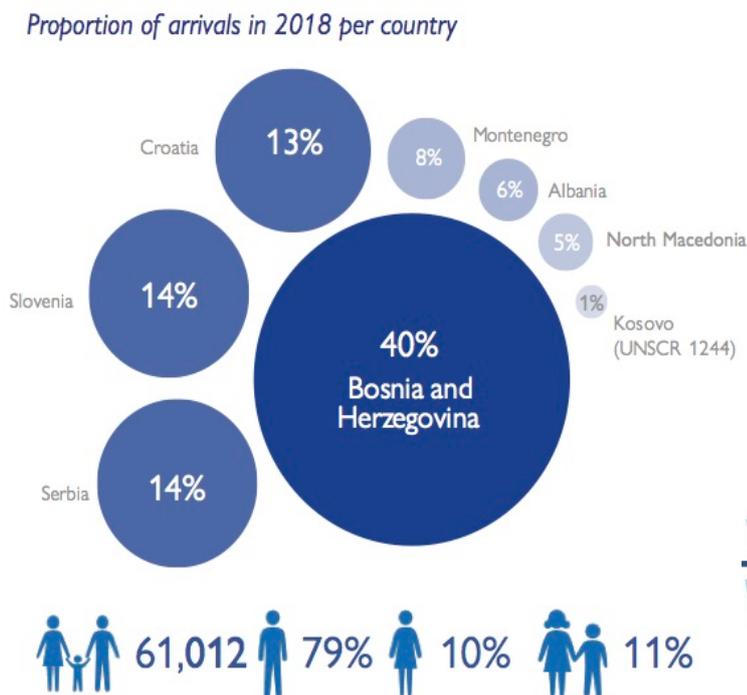[36] See: https://www.unhcr.org/see/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2020/01/BiH-Country-Fact-Sheet-December31-2019-1.pdf
[37] See: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/bosnia-and-herzegovina
[38] See: www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-bih-od-pocetka-godine-stiglo-vise-od-21-hiljade-migranata-procitajte-izvjestaj-drzave/181105122
[39] See: https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-bih-od-pocetka-godine-stiglo-vise-od-21-hiljade-migranata-procitajte-izvjestaj-drzave/181105122
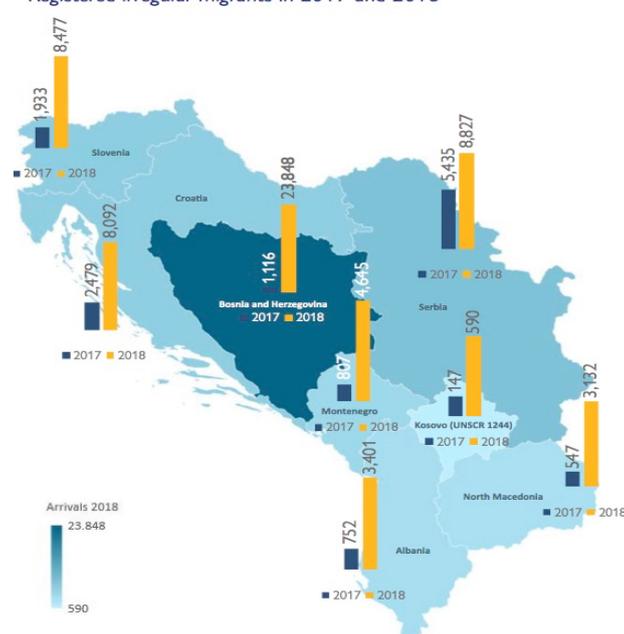[40] See: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/14/human-rights-progress-faltering-in-south-and-central-europe-hrw/

Figure 3. Arrivals to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018

Proportion of arrivals in 2018 per country

Croatia 13%
Montenegro 8%
Albania 6%
North Macedonia 5%
Slovenia 14%
Kosovo (UNSCR 1244) 1%
40% Bosnia and Herzegovina
Serbia 14%

61,012   79%   10%   11%

Registered irregular migrants in 2017 and 2018

Source: IOM[41]

Whereas BiH is labelled as a transit country, many migrants have been forced to remain there after being returned by the Croatian authorities. There is no solution in sight for this problem[42]. Initially, newcomers were placed into closed factory buildings. Until January 2019, most refugees were cramped into two factories in Bihac, which accommodated up to 2,500 people[43]. Since the EU allocated EUR 9.2 million in assistance[44], several temporary reception centres have been established. The centres are overseen by IOM[45], which along with other NGOs, has provided the residents with basic shelter, three meals per day, portable shower facilities, basic medical care and legal advice.

RECENT DYNAMICS

In spite of the EU-Turkey Agreement and presumed closure of the Balkan route, migrants have continued to trickle into the WB. At the end of 2019, the WB migration route remained one of the busiest into Europe. Over 108,000 refugees and migrants have crossed the WB states[46][47], turning them into highways to Europe.

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[41] See: https://migration.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/14.%20WB%20Brief%202018_Final.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=5166
[42] See: https://rm.coe.int/commdh-2018-12-letter-to-the-authorities-regarding-the-migration-situa/1680870e4d
[43] See: http://ba.one.un.org/content/dam/unct/bih/PDFs/UNCTBiHSitReps/Inter-agency%20refugee%20and%20migrant%20operational%20update-%20January%202019.pdf
[44] See: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/europe/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en
[45] See: https://bih.iom.int/iom's-migration-response
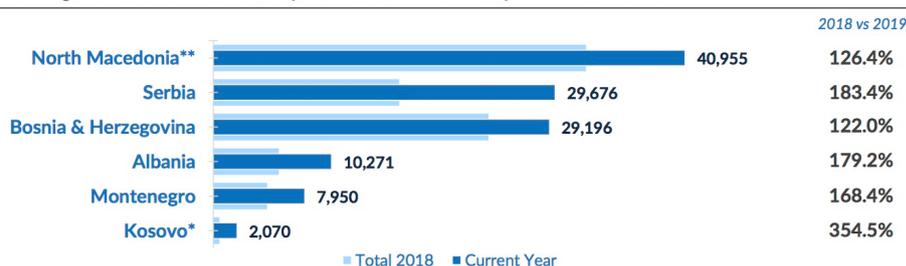[46] Balkan in this context includes Greece, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia and Albania
[47] See: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16647/pdf/refugees_and_migrants_balkans_regional_overview_q3_2019_sc_bmdh_data.pdf

Chart 1. Overview of new arrivals to WB countries[48]

Mixed Migrations "new arrivals" comparison between current year and total of 2018

Country	Current Year	2018 vs 2019
North Macedonia**	40,955	126.4%
Serbia	29,676	183.4%
Bosnia & Herzegovina	29,196	122.0%
Albania	10,271	179.2%
Montenegro	7,950	168.4%
Kosovo*	2,070	354.5%

■ Total 2018   ■ Current Year

Source: UNHCR Western Balkans, Refugees, asylum-seekers and other mixed movements as of end December 2019

The above chart illustrates the exponential increases in migration movements, especially across North Macedonia. Bosnia and Serbia continue representing the main transit routes for migrant groups – there was a clear increase in numbers from 2018. In 2019, there were 12,210 applications for asylum across the WB states, but only 2.3% first instance decisions were reached. Only 6% of the submitted intentions are effectively converted into formal asylum applications. This trend has remained stable throughout the region in 2019 as well[49]. Albania and Kosovo both saw an increase in asylum applications in 2019. Overall, there was an increase in applications from nationals of Morocco, Burundi and Cuba[50]. Across all six WB states, the trajectory of mixed migration has increased steadily since 2017[51]. The winter saw a 37% drop in the number of asylum submissions, with the recorded arrivals decreasing in a similar way. Apart from the seasonal reasons, the long duration of first-instance asylum decisions is potentially deterring the pursuit of asylum avenues in the WB states. Prospective migrants and refugees perceive an eventual integration pessimistically[52]. North Macedonia has seen the highest increase in migration movements. However, only 17% of the newly-arrived remained in the country for over a month[53]. The increased migration flows have been matched by an increased number of reported cases of pushbacks, violence by public authorities and abuse at the borders. None of these repressions has dissuaded the thousands of people from continuing their journey into Europe.

Europe's response has been largely security-centered with Frontex stepping up surveillance measures at the EU's external borders. The so-called 'Maritime Aerial Surveillance Programme' (MAS) has deployed surveillance airplanes and drones at the borders, providing for real-time monitoring at the Frontex headquarters in Warsaw[54]. The agency has also established Europe's first uniformed service, the European Border and Coast Guard standing corp. Some may even work outside the European Union in countries that have signed Status Agreements with the EU. Europe's insistence on the fortification of its border regime has led to a securitization of the migration narrative.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, progress was made on resettlement and statelessness. In December 2019, the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees and Migration presented five pledges at the Global Refugee Forum, including integration, education and emergency preparedness systems. The Commission has also been assisting migrants with language classes and vocational training[55]. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) and Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC) have increased their efforts to aid the migrant effort locally, by running workshops and providing legal assistance[56]. UNHCR and their partners identified and referred 484 newly arrived unaccompanied or separated children to the Child Welfare Services. The WB countries need to build on these small victories and initiatives, including by investigating innovative ways to face the migration challenge, even if without receiving the support expected from the EU.

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48 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia
49 RBE - Western Balkans - Asylum Statistics - Summary of key trends observed as of 31 December 2019 at https://reliefweb.int/report/world/rbe-western-balkans-asylum-statistics-summary-key-trends-observed-31-december-2019
50 ibid p.3
51 See p.4 UNHCR Western Balkans, Refugees, asylum-seekers and other mixed movements as of end December 2019 at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73832
52 RBE - Western Balkans - Asylum Statistics - Summary of key trends observed as of 31 December 2019 p.1 at https://reliefweb.int/report/world/rbe-western-balkans-asylum-statistics-summary-key-trends-observed-31-december-2019
53 UNHCR, North Macedonia Asylum Statistical Overview in 2019 as of 31 December 2019
54 Frontex in Brief 2019 Report https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/General/frontex_inbrief_website_002.pdf p.20
55 See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/73432.pdf p.1
56 ibid

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The migration flows towards the EU will continue and undoubtedly have significant repercussions for the WB states. People in need of protection, fleeing persecution and looking for better prospects will continue coming to Europe. A survey among 500 migrants and refugees found that only one third of respondents changed their plans upon arriving to Greece. This suggests that their destination preferences are relatively fixed. Perceptions of opportunity, stability and security were key in forming these preferences. Moreover, the situation in Syria remains tense and may result in further large-scale flows to Europe and the Balkans[57].

The monitoring, relief response and even processing of migrants - whether seeking passage or as refugees/asylum seekers - varies from one country to another. Recent historical and political upheavals in the region make the intergovernmental cooperation challenging. Nevertheless, a coordinated and targeted response aiming at providing safety and preventing the further loss of life must be at the heart of any future approach to migration in the Balkans. The WB countries need to adopt a holistic approach to irregular migration and border crossings, which show no sign of abating. While it is impossible to prevent all irregular movements, the need to establish a dialogue that helps to improve the situation and deliver long-term solutions is evident. The changing dynamics on the ground require constant monitoring to inform governments' decisions. The states need to mobilise all instruments available and face any upcoming crisis in a collective manner.

The far-reaching consequences of not having a uniform migration policy will also affect future generations. The response to the migration crisis will impact the national labour markets, overall prosperity and the prospects of EU accession. Over the past years, emigration rather than immigration has characterised the Balkans: "Several countries in the region are projected to experience very significant population decline by 2050 (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine)"[58]. Moreover, the "persistence of negative perceptions towards migration has created challenges for governments' efforts to promote integration"[59]. In the short- to medium-term, labour and skills shortages will challenge employment and economic growth prospects for the EU and the Balkans[60].

While it is difficult to implement uniform support systems across the WB states right away, basic humanitarian principles and provisions need to be upheld while also supporting local communities in managing the situation on the ground and in debunking the various myths and prejudices towards migrants. The WB states need to collaborate in order to ensure that resettlement programmes are operational, family reunification arranged and visa applications processed. Reports of push-backs, denials of access to asylum, physical and verbal abuse, including of children[61], and a lacklustre attitude to identifying and assisting those in need at the borders are not only disturbing but also contradict European and international laws, human rights standards and the principles of international protection.

- **Tackling hate crime**: in 2016, the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that "violence, harassment, threats and xenophobic speech targeting asylum seekers and migrants remain grave, be they committed by State authorities, private companies or individuals, or vigilante groups"[62]. The immigration of third-country nationals evoked negative feelings among 56% of EU citizens[63]. Across ten EU countries, an average of 56% of the public stated that all further migration from majority Muslim countries should be halted[64]. Such negative perceptions of migration, especially from certain countries, is rife. When those who seek refuge are perceived as a threat, they are stripped of their dignity and face Europe's inability to adopt humanitarian migration policies[65].The WB states need to ensure that racist

[57] See: https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis_for_2019.pdf, p. 39
[58] See: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en_chapter3.pdf, p. 31
[59] Ibid, p. 31
[60] See: http://ec.europa.eu/economy_nance/publications/european_economy/2014/pdf/ee8_en.pdf
[61] www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/11/croatia-migrants-pushed-back-bosnia-and-herzegovina
[62] *Current Migration Situation in the EU: Hate Crime*. See: http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/current-migration-situation-eu-hate-crime
[63] See: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontofce/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_rst_en.pdf
[64] See: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en_chapter3.pdf p.31
[65] Ibid

and discriminatory practices and views are not left unchallenged. They need to foster active citizenship by challenging rumours, perceptions and creating a space for dialogue, involving the civil society, international organisations and the very communities. The Council of Europe's anti-rumour strategy shows possible solutions and steps forward in this respect[66].

- **Coast Guard Training**: In 2017-2018, over 5,500 people are believed to have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea, while 2016 was the deadliest year to date[67]. Many deaths continue to go unreported[68]. The coast guards of the Balkan states that have a shore require capacity-building and effective procedures to ensure the safety and humane reception of migrants. The IOM's Missing Migrants Project may help to document cases of missing persons and deaths[69].

- **Coherent Return Policy**: The absence of a well-functioning return policy for those who do not qualify for asylum remains a key challenge. It is often difficult to confirm the identity and nationality of the asylum seekers, especially when they lack personal documents. Moreover, some countries of origin refuse or are unable to identify their citizens and thereby oppose their return and instead leave them stranded. The development of a relocation and return system would help to reduce the number of people risking their lives to enter Europe, thwart the machinations of smugglers and traffickers and help distinguish between those who qualify for asylum and the rest.

- **Improved data collection and analysis**: The immigration policies of the WB countries, their methodologies for collecting the relevant data and the complexities of transit migration hinder a proper analyses of the situation on the ground. A harmonized approach to capturing the irregular migrant stock in the region would be overly beneficial.

- **Improved Border Management**: According to UNHCR, states need to *"stop apprehending and returning thousands of people at the border to neighbouring countries without allowing them to seek asylum or assessing individually whether they have international protection or other humanitarian needs (pushbacks). Efforts to protect children and to provide support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence need to be steeped up, as well as better access to safe and legal pathways as alternatives to these dangerous journeys"*[70].

- **Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling**: UNODC (2018) reports that 370,000 migrants were smuggled into the EU by sea in 2016 alone, many of whom may have also been victims of human trafficking. It is of great concern that cases of abuse and violence by smugglers and other criminal networks continue to occur throughout the region[71]. The new restrictions progressively imposed by European countries since 2016 have significantly increased the vulnerabilities of migrants. There should be local multidisciplinary coordination groups on trafficking that are able to identify victims and direct them toward specialist support.

- **Improved security**: Some EU Member States provide examples of their responses to reported incidents, such as enhancing the security for reception centres, informing people on options to report abuses, training the police, or carry out trust-building activities. In response to the attacks on reception centres (e.g. in Germany), most federal states deployed security companies[72] and additional police force in and around the reception centres. Finally, multilingual posters aim to inform and to encourage refugees to contact the police in case of an emergency[73].

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[66] See: www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/anti-rumours
[67] See: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68006 p.1
[68] See: www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-507
[69] See: https://missingmigrants.iom.int
[70] www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/
[71] 'Desperate Journeys' (2017) www.unhcr.org/58b449f54.pdf
[72] Although, there were some reports of abuses by staff of security companies.
[73] https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-november-monthly-focus-hate-crime_en.pdf p.12

- **Fair and improved asylum procedures**: All migrants seeking international protection ought to have the possibility to do so. Claims should be considered based on individual merit and not pre-emptively judged. This presupposes investigating countries of origin and the various circumstances that forced the individual applicants to leave. A timely and fair assessment of their application needs to be ensured. Meanwhile, the asylum applicants should be granted shelter and support (even for irregular migrants). Furthermore, there needs to be dedicated additional funding for asylum and forced displacement to hosting communities and countries through building financial instruments that recognize forced displacement as a development challenge[74]. UNHCR has called on the Croatia and Germany presiding in the Council of the European Union (EU) in 2020 to show leadership in better protecting refugees across Europe and abroad by moving ahead with a sustainable asylum reform and providing more support for the countries hosting the most refugees[75]. The pre-accession process provides opportunities to support WB countries to further develop their asylum systems. This requires a continuous commitment by the EU to provide direct access to its territory as well as asylum procedures to persons seeking international protection[76].

The Global Compact on Refugees[77], helps develop systems that are both responsive and responsible in addressing arrivals of mixed movements. At the heart of their respective responses, WB states need to take into account the UNHCR Better Protection Refugee principles which encourage to:

→ Foster responsibility sharing and solidarity;
→ Ensure access to territory and fair and fast procedures;
→ Support integration and efficient and rights-based return systems;
→ Invest in resettlement and complementary pathways; and
→ Address statelessness[78].

- **Support integration of recognized refugees**: In order to ensure social cohesion, stability and security, communities must be sufficiently equipped to receive refugees. Those refugees need support to realize their potential in their new environment. This involves increased funding for integration programmes; predictable, harmonized services, rather than restrictive measures, can reduce onward irregular movement and increase integration prospects[79]. Further incentives include the possibility of family reunification and sufficient means for the refugees to become self-reliant and establish a proper living in the mid-term[80]. Any future relocation plans should also entail efforts to improve integration, including integration into the education system, and employment conditions[81]. Amidst an ageing European population, migrants can make an important economic contribution if well-integrated.

Authorities on the ground need to ensure:

→ The safety of humanitarian organisations and activists to work without fear;
→ The safety of all migrants (including children) from threats, attacks, violence and discrimination;
→ Asylum seekers' access to fair procedures and proper refugee status determination;
→ A better preparedness of WB states to respond to the needs of migrants transiting or remaining on their territory, including the provision of safe housing, food, medical care and legal support;
→ Regional condemnation and investigation of push backs, violence and intimidation instigated by border police;
→ That funds provided for border protection are not contributing to human rights violations;
→ Impartial investigation of violence by border police against migrants and refugees and taking action.

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[74] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Lives in Dignity: from Aid-dependence to Self-reliance, Forced Displacement and Development,* COM (2016)
[75] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR's Recommendations for the Croatian and German Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (EU) , 9 January 2020, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/5dee08387.html [accessed 14 February 2020]
[76] p.4 Ibid
[77] See: https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf
[78] UNHCR, Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally: UNHCR's proposals to rebuild trust through better management, partnership and solidarity, December 2016, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/58385d4e4.html
[79] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR's Recommendations for the Croatian and German Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (EU) , 9 January 2020, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/5dee08387.html [accessed 14 February 2020] p.5
[80] ibid p.5-6
[81] See: https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/deciding-which-road-take-insights-how-migrants-and-refugees-greece-plan-onward

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