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Migrants walk on the railway tracks near a border line between Serbia and Hungary, at the heart of the so-called Balkan route near village of Horgos, Serbia, Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022.

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MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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Summary and key findings

This study examines the irregular movement of refugees and migrants on the Western Balkan route towards the European Union, with a focus on nationals from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan.¹ Through interviews with 49 refugees and migrants and 28 key informants, mainly in Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), it provides detailed insights into intra-Western Balkans migration trends, the latest developments in smuggling dynamics, and the serious protection issues that vulnerable groups continue to face.

Key findings

- **Trends** – 2022 saw the highest number of arrivals in the Western Balkans since the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015/16 with over 144,118 attempts to cross borders between the EU and Western Balkans recorded. Most arrivals were Syrian and Afghan adult men, with women and children comprising about a tenth each. Afghan arrivals remained persistently high. Iraqi arrivals began to climb after the effective closure of the Belarus route into Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. Pakistani arrivals peaked in the summer then switched to the Central Mediterranean. Iranian arrivals on the route were few.
- **Drivers** – Difficulties in transit countries, especially Türkiye, appear to be a key driver of onward movements through the Eastern Mediterranean and onwards to the Western Balkans, namely the well-founded fear of return. Home countries for most refugees and migrants on the route remained turbulent.
- **Route** – Bulgaria was a popular route to the Western Balkans for refugees and migrants with greater physical strength and/or less ability to pay. Travelling through Greece, then onwards through North Macedonia or Albania, was seen as less physically arduous but more expensive, and there was widespread fear of the Greek police.
- **Policy and response** – Substantial investments in EU border security are set to continue into 2023, while humanitarian funding is downscaled. With refugees and migrants transiting the Western Balkans more quickly, the high turnover is putting pressure on government and humanitarian services that have had funding reduced. Conversely, if large numbers of refugees and migrants once again become ‘stuck’ on the route scaling the response back up may be a challenge.
- **Border violence** – Serious violence continued at the Türkiye-Bulgaria, Türkiye-Greece, and Serbia-Hungary borders. Violence continued also at the Bosnia & Herzegovina-Croatia border but seems to have partially calmed in 2022, with a greater ease of transit and a lower proportion of violent pushbacks recorded.
- **Human smuggling** – Refugees and migrants continued to rely on smugglers, mostly from their own national or linguistic networks. Some used multi-country packages arranged and paid for in origin countries with money released from escrow in instalments as the journey progressed; others made one-off deals for single border crossings paid up front in cash. Interviewees paid over €11,000 for transcontinental journeys from Afghanistan to Europe, and as little as €100 for the more straightforward crossing between Bulgaria and Serbia. Some travelled without smugglers, but this was difficult in most cases, especially for families.
- **Protection** – Across the Western Balkans, 1,383 people filed asylum claims in 2022, less than 4% of the 38,418 who expressed their intention to seek asylum and just 0.7% of the 192,226 registered arrivals. The majority of assessed claims (those not withdrawn by applicants) were lodged in Serbia, which granted protection in 30 of 93 assessed cases.

¹ In this paper, ‘refugees and migrants’ is an umbrella term that includes asylum seekers. The six states making up the Western Balkans are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

Introduction

2022 saw the highest number of migrants and refugees detected at the EU's external borders since 2016. Most originated from Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Almost half of the 330,000 detections of irregular entry into the EU in 2022 were recorded at Western Balkan borders, making the Western Balkan route the most popular of the various routes into the bloc.

This study investigates irregular migration from Türkiye to the European Union via the six countries of the Western Balkans (WB6). It draws on available secondary data and primary data collected via interviews, undertaken primarily in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Four main areas of inquiry guide the study:

- **Trends and intentions** - who is migrating, where are they going, and why?
- **Conditions and protection** - what are the living conditions en route? To what extent can migrants access basic services? What are the prospects of protection?
- **Smuggling** - how is irregular migration organised and paid for, and how does this influence trends?
- **Access to information** - what kind of information do migrants need and where do they seek it?

The focus is primarily on migrants who arrive in the Western Balkans with the intention of continuing to the EU and UK to seek asylum. It therefore spends less time on other significant migration movements, such as the smuggling of Albanian nationals to the UK, or low skilled labour immigration to and from the WB6. In addition, the report does not provide in-depth analysis of Ukrainians on the Western Balkans route.²

Methodology and limitations

This study is the result of analysis from a desk review and primary data collection undertaken between 20th January and 18th February 2023. Field visits took place in Austria, Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), and Serbia.

Desk review

The study draws on a range of grey literature and media reports from: international agencies specialising in migration and protection, international agencies specialising in tackling smuggling of migrants, international and local NGOs in Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, and international and regional media.³

Interviews

Forty-nine refugees and migrants contributed to the study across 26 individual and group qualitative interviews. The countries of origin of interviewees and demographic characteristics generally aligned with the profile of irregular migrants in the region during the fieldwork period. Interviewees came from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, and Pakistan, and other countries of origin (see Table 1). All were adults, most (47) were men, and most (45) were in their 20s or 30s. They were selected based on their presence in public spaces. In other words, researchers did not approach refugees and migrants in reception and transit centres. In addition, twenty-eight key informant

2 Ukrainians benefit from the EU's Temporary Protection Directive and near equivalents in the WB6, which permits Ukrainian nationals and some residents fleeing the war to move freely and choose the country in which to seek protection. The UK also has relatively relaxed entry requirements for Ukrainians. Ukrainian nationals' different legal status sets them apart in terms of their migration experience, how they are counted in national statistics, and how they are dealt with in political rhetoric. Though high numbers have transited (there were around 1,000 with temporary protected status in Serbia though 137,000 passed through the territory, according to a key informant from Belgrade) the rights afforded Ukrainians on the move mean the acute protection challenges facing other refugee and migrant nationals are not present.

3 See footnotes throughout this paper.

interviews took place with representatives of international and local NGOs, UN agencies, government, and the media.

Interviews with key informants, refugees, and migrants took place in Serbia (Belgrade and Pirot), Bosnia & Herzegovina (Ilidža in Sarajevo and Bihać), and Austria (Vienna) (See Map 1). Additional interviews were conducted online with key informants in Brussels and Athens. All interviews followed a semi-structured guide with a standard set of questions delivered conversationally.

Map 1. Locations of interviews



Table 1. Number of interviews with refugees and migrants

Country of origin	Number of interviewees
Afghanistan	22
Morocco	7
Pakistan, Algeria	4 each
Cuba, India, Iran	3 each
Bangladesh, Iraq, Syria	1 each
Total	49

Limitations

Interviews with migrants varied in length (from 25 minutes to three hours) and depth, with some migrants much more willing to share more sensitive aspects of their journey than others. The sample also leaned heavily towards Afghan respondents, which reflects their prevalence on the route and the near absence on it of Iraqi, Iranian, and Pakistani nationals, whom we had planned to prioritise in the study.

In order to avoid potentially complicating service delivery, no interviews were sought in reception or transit centres (although some interviewees were nonetheless accommodated in them). This limited the ability of the study to reach women who were even less likely to be present in public spaces than men. Note however, that most refugees and migrants who successfully pass through the Western Balkans never actually enter government-run reception centres. Transiting the region without government or NGO contact is indicative of trouble-free travel. Conversely, many perceive that being registered in the system would slow their journey or undermine future asylum applications.⁴ Availability bias may therefore be a greater limitation, in that most studies, including this one, rely to some extent on migrants who are accommodated in reception centres.

Ethics

All refugees and migrants provided verbal consent before their interviews, which were anonymised before analysis. Where individual cases are described, identifying details have been changed and/ or different cases have been combined to preserve anonymity. Key informants gave their written permission. Others wished to remain anonymous. No quotes are attributed to named individuals and findings reflect the author's own position following analysis of all primary and secondary data.

⁴ As one key informant explained, 'The vast majority report that they were never accommodated in reception centres. [When people do opt to go to official reception centres], it is to warm up for a few days [or because they are injured].' Key informant 6, Belgrade.

1. Context

The six countries of the Western Balkans (WB6) are crucial to the security, economic, human rights, and migration management objectives of the EU and Western countries. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as EU candidate countries with significant Russia-leaning populations and sympathies, are particularly important.

While the fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war has posed economic challenges, the region has largely bounced back from the COVID-19 pandemic, with unemployment and poverty rates down.⁵ Labour shortages have now become a key concern. Shortages are driven by an ageing population persistently low participation of women in the workforce, and high emigration⁶—spurred on by Western Balkan-friendly labour immigration policies in Germany and other labour-hungry European states.⁷

1.1 Rise and fall (and rise) of the Western Balkan route

Serbia and BiH are the de facto gateway to prized destinations in Western Europe. Once their northern borders are passed, refugees and migrants reach the visa-free Schengen zone, and onward travel becomes relatively easy. Not coincidentally, those same borders became a key focus of EU security efforts. These efforts were, at times, dramatically successful in slowing irregular entry, but they created a humanitarian emergency in the process, as hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees were repeatedly and violently pushed back or otherwise unable to move on.⁸

Just a few thousand refugees and migrants attempted to enter the EU irregularly each year until 2013 and 2014, when detections jumped by 217% and 117% respectively, followed by a 1,662% increase in 2015, the first year of the so-called European 'migration crisis'.⁹ The EU and WB6 states worked to reduce the volume of arrivals. In 2015, Hungary built fences at its borders with Croatia and Serbia. In 2016, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Croatia 'closed' their borders, preventing migrants from seeking asylum at official crossing points. The March 2016 statement of cooperation or 'EU-Türkiye deal' slowed departures from Türkiye's coast and increased readmissions from Greece. In 2018, Greece and North Macedonia increased security on their common border. In 2020, Serbia constructed a barbed wire fence along its border with North Macedonia.¹⁰

From 2017 to 2019, numbers largely remained flat. Despite movement restrictions imposed after the onset of the COVID pandemic—and in part because of them, as some refugees and migrants' ability to earn a living in origin and transit countries was negatively affected—numbers began to rise again.

5 World Bank. "Western Balkans Regular Report: Beyond the Crises," November 2022. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/38189/P17947818ec26c8c17fe014901194ac104a1b5d70a2a.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

6 Ibid.

7 Germany has been the primary destination for nationals of all the WB6, except Albanians, who have primarily moved to Italy and Greece. 28% of Albanians lived abroad in 2015/16 compared to 20% of Bosnians and 10% of Serbians. OECD. "Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits," June 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Labour-Migration-report.pdf>.

8 ECRE. "Balkan Route: Systematic Pushbacks Continue Across the Balkans, Shortcomings in Croatia's Monitoring Mechanism, Hungary Applies Double Standards in Approach to Arrivals," July 8, 2022. <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-systematic-pushbacks-continue-across-the-balkans-shortcomings-in-croatias-monitoring-mechanism-hungary-apply-double-standards-in-approach-to-arrivals-latest-update/>.

9 See Frontex risk analyses 2022, 2021, 2020, 2019 etc. Frontex. "Risk Analysis for 2022/23," October 7, 2022. https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/ARA_2022_Public_Web.pdf.

10 Kovacevic, Nikola. "Country Report: Serbia," May 2022.

1.2 Border security and visa policy remain EU priorities into 2023

In anticipation of ongoing irregular movement through the region, the EU, its most affected member states, and other donors, have continued to invest in border security, alongside systems to manage migration, and to develop systems and facilities for protection. The rationale and outlines of EU support for the WB6 was outlined in the Tirana Declaration adopted at an EU-Western Balkans summit in December 2022.¹¹ Delivered within the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), this support designed to allow Western Balkan states, almost all of which are EU candidate countries,¹² 'to enhance asylum and reception systems, strengthen border protection, fight smuggling networks and organised crime groups, and step up returns' to countries of origin.

A visible outcome of objectives to strengthen border protection is the greater presence of national police and the European Border and Coast Guard agency, better known as Frontex, at EU-WB6 borders, especially the Serbia-Hungary, Serbia-Bulgaria, BiH-Croatia, and North Macedonia-Greece 'green' land borders. Frontex, which typically operates on EU territory, is already on the ground in Albania (since 2019),¹³ Montenegro (2020),¹⁴ Serbia (2021),¹⁵ and North Macedonia (2023),¹⁶ and 2023 will likely see deployment of its personnel for the first time to non-EU borders within the WB6.¹⁷

Less change has been evident in the area of returns from WB6 states, often because of administrative hurdles (or simply reluctance) around the formal identification of nationals by origin country governments, even in situations where a readmissions agreement is in place. Examples of these hurdles being overcome include BiH's return of Pakistani, Moroccan, and Bangladeshi nationals in 2022; Austria, Serbia, and Hungary's joint agreement in November 2022 to help Serbia facilitate forced returns;¹⁸ and Austria's swift agreement with India in January 2023.¹⁹

The Tirana Declaration also 'advocates greater alignment of visa policy in the WB6 and Türkiye.' In 2022, Serbia tightened visa regulations for some of the third-country nationals considered to be more likely to travel irregularly to EU countries and therefore deemed by the EU to be 'high risk' (such as Tunisians, Guineans, Burundians, and Indians), partly as a condition for protecting its own citizens' visa-free access to the EU. (See section below headed 'Visa-free travel affords better access'.)

11 European Council. "Tirana Declaration," December 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60568/tirana-declaration-en.pdf>.

12 While all the WB6 states are included in the EU's enlargement policy, Kosovo is currently only a 'potential' candidate for membership.

13 Frontex. "Three Years of Operation in Albania," May 2022. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/three-years-of-operation-in-albania-Uot4JP>

14 Frontex. "Frontex Launches Second Operation in Montenegro," October 14, 2020. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-launches-second-operation-in-montenegro-COPc3E>.

15 Frontex. "Frontex Expands Presence in Western Balkans with Operation in Serbia," June 16, 2021. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-expands-presence-in-western-balkans-with-operation-in-serbia-9WRMiW>.

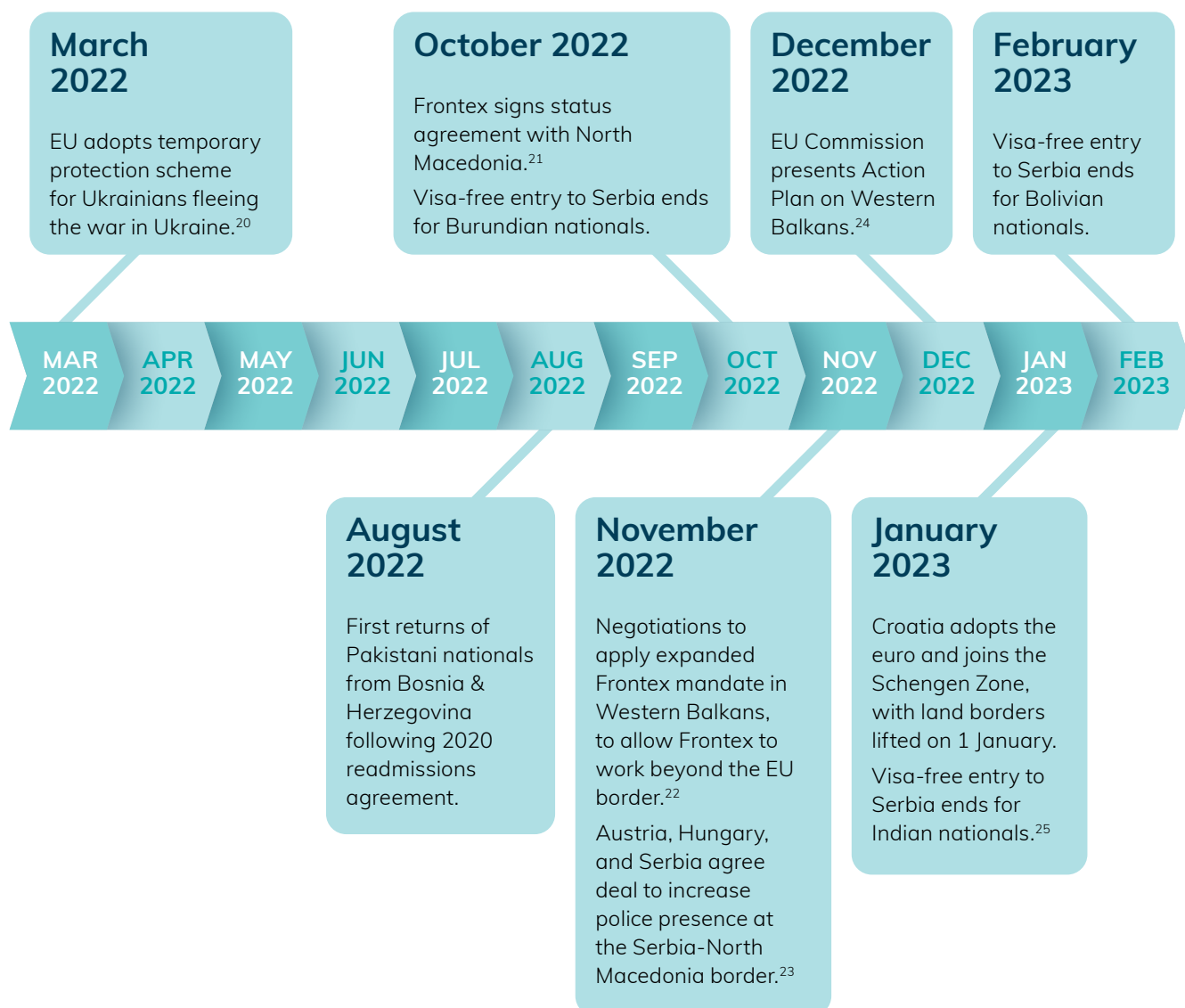
16 Agreement reached in October 2022 likely to be operationalised in 2023. European Commission. "EU Signs an Agreement with North Macedonia on European Border." European Commission - European Commission, October 26, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6417.

17 Foy, H. "EU to Deploy Border Agents in the Western Balkans for First Time." Financial Times, December 6, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/5cddd3f4-3e6d-414b-b6e5-7c2d2e94129c>.

18 Hill, Thomas. "Austria, Serbia and Hungary Strike Migration Deal." euronews, November 17, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/17/austria-serbia-and-hungary-strike-migration-deal-saying-eu-measures-have-failed>.

19 Stickings, Tim. "Austria and India Strike Deal to Curb Illegal Migration." The National, January 2, 2023. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/2023/01/02/austria-and-india-strike-deal-to-curb-illegal-migration/>.

Figure 1. Policy developments in 2022/23



20 European Council. "EU Migration and Asylum Policy," February 9, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/>.

21 Agreements with Albania, Montenegro and Serbia already concluded. An agreement with Bosnia & Herzegovina to apply Frontex's expanded mandate was discussed but not concluded as of November 2022. However, the 2019 Working Agreement remains in place.

22 Council of the EU. "Border Management: Council Authorises the Opening of Negotiations with Four Western Balkans Partners on Frontex Cooperation," November 18, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/18/border-management-council-authorises-the-opening-of-negotiations-with-four-western-balkans-partners-on-frontex-cooperation/>.

23 Gec, Jovana. "Austria, Hungary Equipping Serbia to Curb Border Crossings." AP NEWS, October 6, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-hungary-migration-austria-94d5fe32eacf226611ac42f5c3147c36>.

24 European Commission (2022) [EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans](#).

25 Except those holding valid Schengen or UK visa/ residence.

1.3 Rights violations grow

The strengthening of border security and increased violence faced by refugees and migrants at the perimeters of the WB6 have gone hand-in-hand. Beatings, theft, destruction or confiscation of property, unsafe conditions in detention centres, and forced exposure to harsh weather conditions, have all been well documented at the borders of Albania, Austria, Belarus, BiH, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Türkiye. (See the 'Violence against refugees and migrants' subsection below.)

In some cases, refugees and migrants have sought to bypass restrictions or otherwise avoid harm and hardship. Between 2020 and 2021, there was an increase in high-risk hiding in vehicles, trains or ferries. Afghans have been particularly likely to attempt to enter the EU via these means,²⁶ exposing them to the risks of 'overcrowded hidden compartments, without sufficient levels of oxygen or to hazardous journeys in (sealed) refrigerated compartments.'²⁷ In February 2023, 18 Afghans died of asphyxiation while packed into a truck in Bulgaria.²⁸

Others, in their attempt to bypass difficult border crossings, seek relatively more expensive passages that are seen to have higher chances of success. One such route runs from Türkiye direct to Italy via sea. In late February 2023, 100 people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Iran died when their boat crashed while trying to land in the south-east of Italy.²⁹

Refugees and migrants' efforts to avoid some of the most difficult parts of the Western Balkans route suggests that the challenges associated with attempting the route are well known. The securitisation of borders is by itself not an effective deterrent. Even as the sophistication of border management reached new heights, refugees and migrants—and their smugglers—continue to be able to reach the EU via the WB6 in significant numbers (see 'Trends' section below).

26 "In 2021, 55% of all cases involved Afghan migrants. The second most reported nationality, Syrian, accounted for little more than 7%." Frontex. "Risk Analysis for 2022/23". <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/risk-analysis-for-2022-2023/>

27 Ibid.

28 Armstrong, Mark. "Arrests in Bulgaria after 18 Afghan Migrants Found Dead in a Truck." euronews, February 19, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/02/19/arrests-in-bulgaria-after-18-migrants-found-dead-in-a-truck>.

29 BBC News. "Italy Migrant Boat Shipwreck: More than 100 People Feared Dead." BBC News, February 27, 2023, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64784208>.

2. Trends

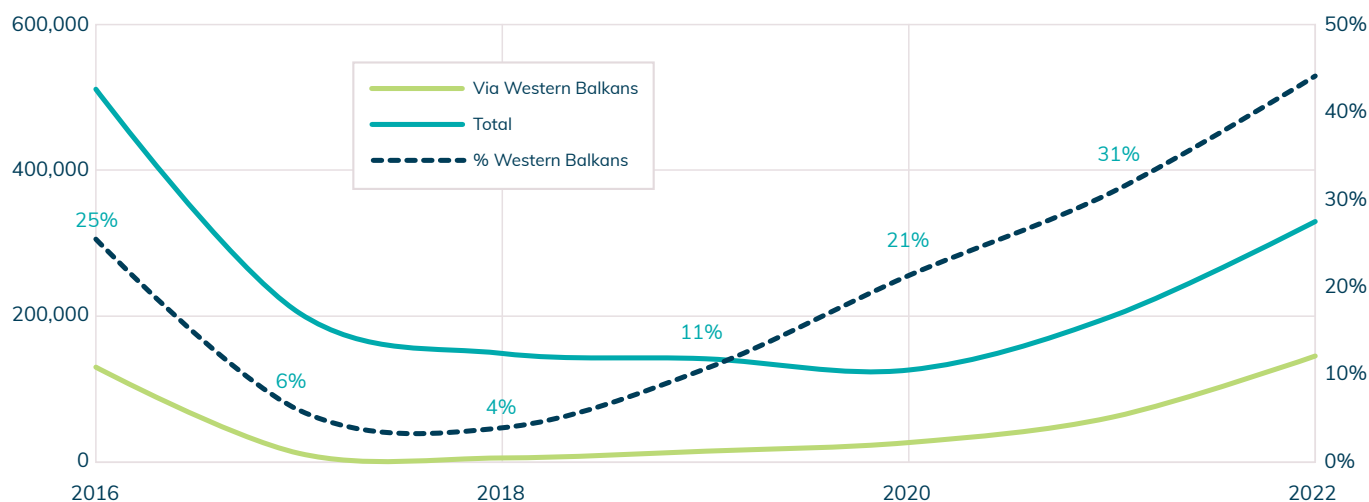
Key findings

- In 2022, the Western Balkan route recorded the highest numbers arriving to the EU since 2016, and nearly half of all irregular arrivals to the bloc that year.
- Male Afghan and Syrian refugees and migrants arrived in consistently high numbers, while women and children were relatively few, accounting for around a tenth of total numbers.
- Burundians, Indians, and Tunisians all became less prominent by the end of the year, partly due to Serbia introducing visa requirements.

2.1 Highest arrival numbers since 2016

In 2022, irregular arrivals to the EU via the Western Balkans increased by around 60% over the previous year to reach the highest number since the so-called 'European migration crisis' of 2015/16. There were 144,118 detections of such irregular border crossings³⁰ and WB authorities registered 192,266 refugees and migrants on their territories.³¹ The Western Balkan route thus again grew in importance vis-à-vis overall EU arrivals, with its share of total irregular detections at the EU border growing from 11% in 2019 to 44% in 2022 (Figure 2).³²

Figure 2. Detections of attempted irregular entry into the EU 2016-2022³³



Source: Frontex

30 Dataset downloaded from "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>. There were 61,618 detections on the Western Balkan route in 2021. Precise figures for irregular arrivals do not exist but detections of attempts to cross EU borders irregularly and registrations by WB6 authorities suggest with high confidence that 2022 marked the resurgence of the Western Balkan route.

31 IOM reports 192,266. See IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022," February 2023. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1076/files/documents/WB_Annual_Report.pdf.

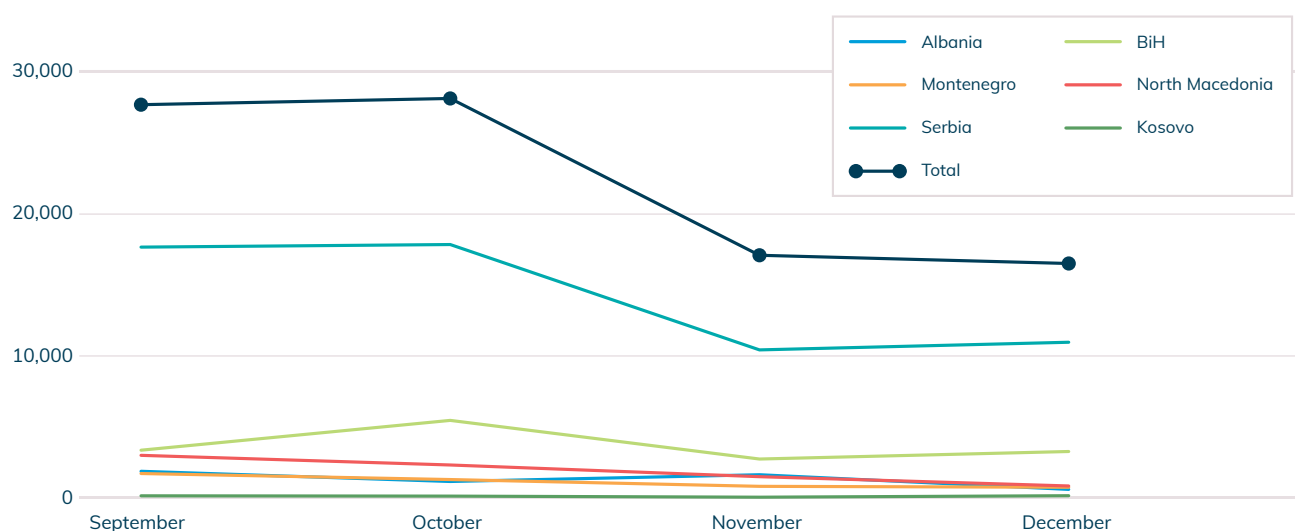
32 In 2021, most (69%) detected irregular land border crossings into the EU were at borders with Serbia. 65% of all clandestine entry attempts to the EU were at four border crossing points in the Western Balkans with Hungary, Romania, or Croatia. See Frontex. "Risk Analysis for 2022/23" and Frontex. "Western Balkan Route." Accessed January 15, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>.

33 Detections relate to those who attempt to cross elsewhere than at official border crossing points and not clandestine entries at border crossing points, which are counted separately (and are relatively insignificant). EU-wide detection data is taken from Frontex Risk Analysis 2022/23 except for 2016, which is from Frontex Risk Analysis 2017. Western Balkan detections figures are taken from the Frontex summary risk analysis page at <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>.

Nearly half the refugees and migrants registered by WB6 authorities in 2022 were Syrian, Afghan or Tunisian. The overwhelming majority were adult men. Women made up just 6-10% of the total, and more often came from the Middle East and Africa. Children made up a similar proportion, with unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan particularly prominent. (See Annex 1 for more detail on the composition of arrivals).

Overall registrations began to drop off towards the end of the year (Figure 3) but Afghan, Syrian, and Moroccan nationals continued to arrive in significant numbers into December. Most WB6 registrations in 2022 occurred in Serbia, at a rate of more than 10,000 a month, followed by Bosnia & Herzegovina and then North Macedonia, both in the low thousands.

Figure 3. Irregular arrivals into Western Balkans countries September to December 2022



Source: IOM compilation of national data³⁴

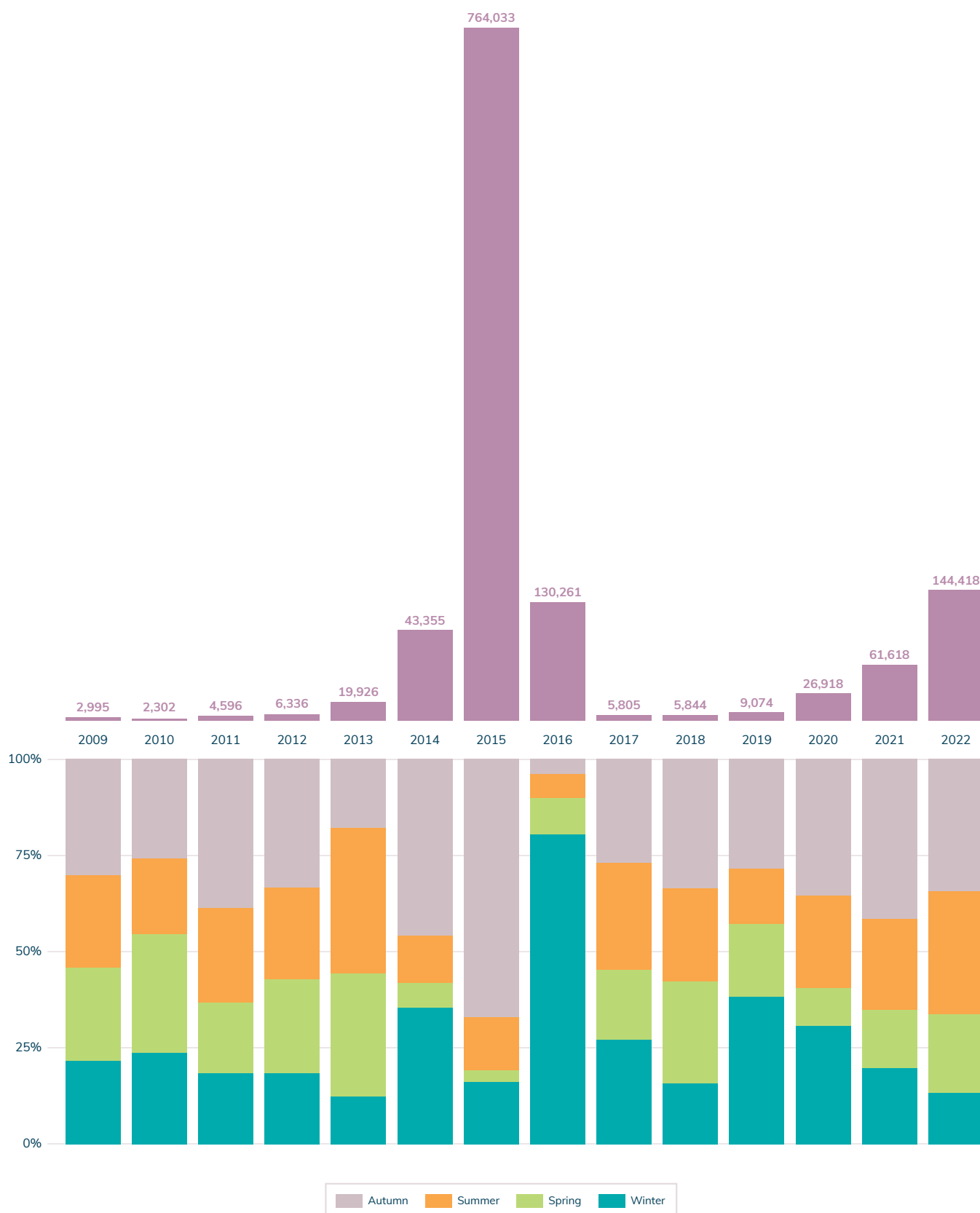
Seasonal factors likely influenced the timing and composition of arrivals. In nine of the 13 years since 2009, winter arrivals have accounted for less than 25% of the total (Figure 4),³⁵ while autumn arrivals were consistently above 25%. This might indicate a preference to begin journeys—and transit more treacherous territory in Iran, for example—in the warmer months, then complete journeys in the winter. Additionally, key informants and migrants both suggested the Western Balkan journey was too hard for women in winter, and that spring would see more women or families arrive. One key informant explained: ‘Women don’t do the Bulgaria route generally, it’s too cold’.³⁶ It is difficult to draw firm conclusions as there are multiple factors influencing the timing of arrivals, including where refugees and migrants are travelling from and the situation on other routes.

³⁴ Registrations are from national data compiled by IOM, 2022 Migration Trends in the Western Balkans.

³⁵ 2016 was an exception as the Western Balkan route was abruptly ‘closed’ in March 2016, leading to a drop-off after record-high arrivals in January and February.

³⁶ Key informant 10, Belgrade

Figure 4. Detections of irregular arrivals in the Western Balkans, by season 2009-2022



37 Author's calculations using Frontex monthly detections data. Gender breakdown not given in publicly available data. Data from Frontex. "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>. Frontex data on irregular detections suggests that the Western Balkan route is indeed more popular in the summer, except for 2016, when the high arrivals seen in January and February abruptly came to a halt with the March 2016 signing of the EU-Türkiye deal.

2.2 Shorter stays signal faster movements

Refugees and migrants moved particularly quickly through the Western Balkans in 2022. More than twice as many were registered in January 2023 than in January 2022, but reception centres were occupied well under their capacity.³⁸ In BiH, 'migrants spent 58 days in transit reception centres in December 2021 compared to 8 days in December 2022'.³⁹

"There were a lot more arrivals in the last year [... around 28,000], but the occupancy of the reception centres stayed about the same [... at about 5,000]."

KEY INFORMANT 1, SARAJEVO

The ease and speed of crossings from BiH or Serbia into Croatia or Hungary to some extent signals the 'openness' of the route as a whole. The reasons behind such quick movement are not certain but may include:

- **Maturity of smuggling networks.** Smugglers are more experienced and knowledgeable about the route, able to draw on larger networks of knowledgeable guides and assistants in the region and can access communications technology that was less available 10 years ago.
- **A relative reduction in intensity and violence of pushbacks, especially in Croatia.** While violent pushbacks of refugees and migrants at the Croatia-BiH border allegedly remain very widespread⁴⁰, a relative reduction in their intensity in 2022 may have played a role (see Safety and security section below for details). This would mean that refugees and migrants pass with fewer attempts or are bolder about trying more often within a short space of time.

"I would say that the [smuggling] networks are becoming more developed. So the time from when they are entering the country, where they are going next etc. they have all the information on where they should go."

KEY INFORMANT 14, BELGRADE

"I always say that smugglers have better organisation than we do. It looks like they are always one step ahead of us."

KEY INFORMANT 2, SARAJEVO

2.3 National trends

In 2022, the most irregular arrivals to the EU via the Western Balkans were Syrian, Afghan, or Moroccan. Despite this, the set of four nationalities examined (Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and Pakistani) have at various times been highly prominent on the Western Balkan and other routes. Even as their numbers have fluctuated, they have remained significant among asylum applicants in the EU and UK.⁴¹ This section examines overall arrival numbers and how routes into the EU compare.

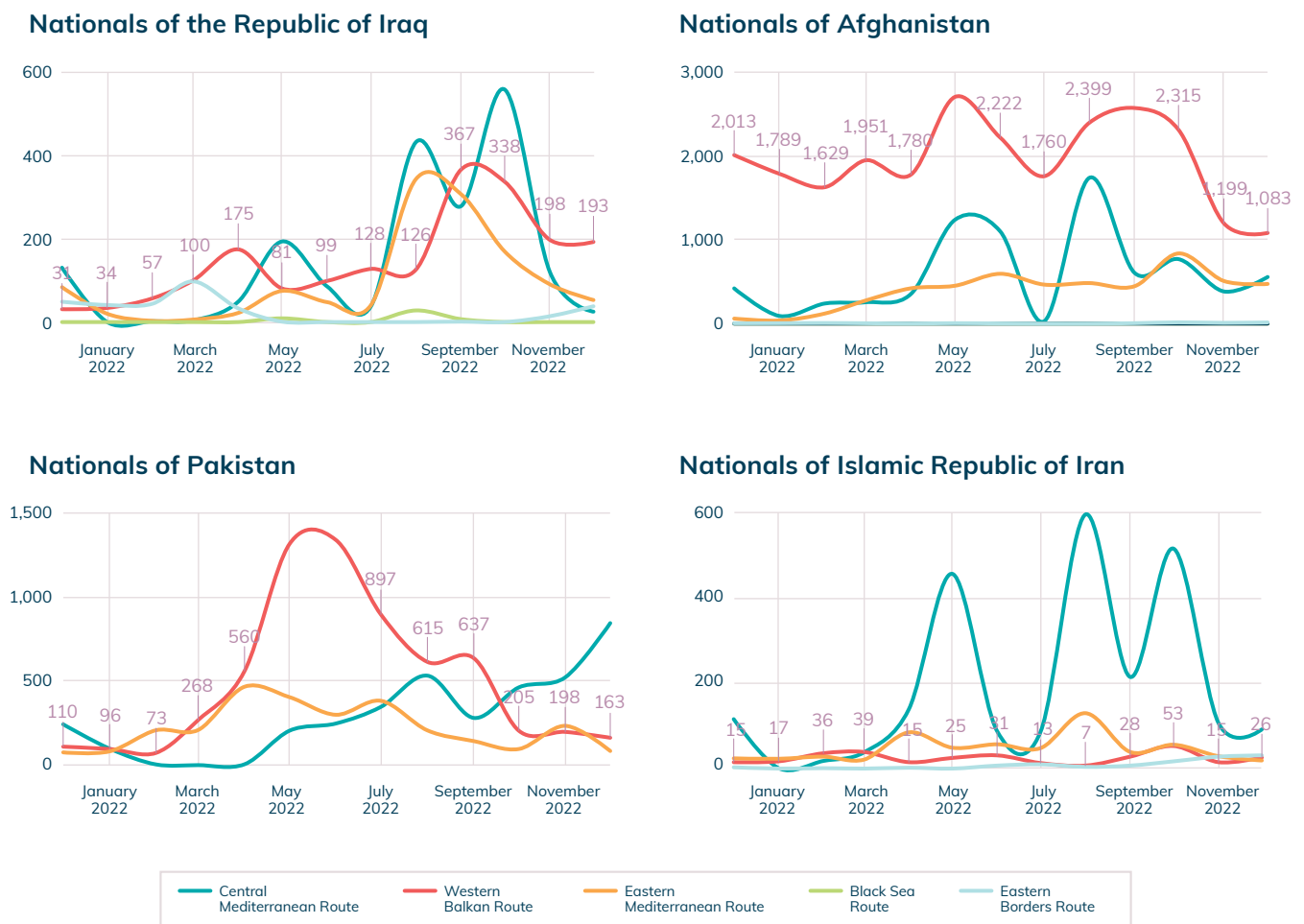
38 Serbia, which recorded 75% of these arrivals, reported that reception centre occupancy was at 35%. BiH, which was in second place with 14% of arrivals, reported that reception centres were running at 21% of their capacity.

39 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022," February 2023. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1076/files/documents/WB_Annual_Report.pdf.

40 Human Rights Watch. "Croatia: Ongoing, Violent Border Pushbacks" May 3, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/croatia-ongoing-violent-border-pushbacks>

41 Asylum applications are an imprecise indicator of irregular arrivals because: refugees and migrants may choose not to lodge a claim; there may be significant delays between application and reporting in statistics; and applications may be lodged by those who have arrived regularly etc.

Figure 5. Detections at the EU's external borders, by nationality and route December 2021 to December 2022



Source: Frontex⁴²

The Western Balkans remained integral to Afghan movements

The Western Balkan route remained the most travelled route for Afghan refugees and migrants entering the EU irregularly in 2022, with detected attempts to cross the borders between WB6 and EU countries⁴³ reaching 23,409. September saw a peak of 2,575 in September before declining slightly towards the winter months.⁴⁴ As of December 2022, Afghans occupied 1,364 Serbian reception centre beds (28% of the total available places) and 64% of those in BiH.⁴⁵

The Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan peaks seemed to coincide, suggesting more Afghans were travelling in general towards the end of the year. Irregular arrivals on the Eastern Mediterranean route⁴⁶ steadily increased from January to May, remained steady, then peaked in October 2023. The 1,821 Afghans detected on the route in the last quarter of 2023 throughout 2022, may feed arrival figures on the Western Balkan route during 2023.

⁴² Frontex. "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>

⁴³ "Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia at the land borders with countries from the Western Balkan region." Frontex 'dictionary' accompanying statistics, downloadable at "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>

⁴⁴ Arrivals data counts detections/encounters, not people, so double counting is likely. The numbers are nevertheless useful indicators of trends.

⁴⁵ IOM. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Situation Response Report," December 2022. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1076/files/documents/01_IOM%20BiH%20External%20Sitrep_8%20JANUARY.pdf

⁴⁶ Defined as arrivals to Cyprus, Greece sea border, Greece, and Bulgaria land borders with Türkiye. Frontex 'dictionary' accompanying statistics, downloadable at "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>

Afghan first-time asylum applications in EU states also climbed, from the 7,000-8,000 in the first half of the year to nearly 14,000 by October. In Austria, the withdrawal of claims – at about half the rate of new asylum applications⁴⁷ – suggested that a significant proportion of new arrivals were not remaining in Austria but continuing their journey to other destinations. Asylum application figures show Germany, France, and the UK to be popular destinations.

Iranians avoided the Western Balkans

Detections of Iranian nationals crossing Western Balkan borders were consistently minuscule in 2022, never exceeding 40 in any given month. At the end of the year, only a handful of Iranians were registered in reception centres in BiH (about 37)⁴⁸ and Serbia (31).⁴⁹ Iranians were detected in larger numbers on the Central Mediterranean route, albeit at an irregular rate, with over 500 arrivals in May, August, and October, but fewer than 100 in June, July, and December.

After arriving in Europe, Iranian nationals appeared to continue mainly to Germany,⁵⁰ which averaged 938 applications per month from Iranians in the final quarter of 2022, and to the northern French coast, a departure point for travel across the English Channel to the UK, which recorded an average 848 Iranians among monthly small boat arrivals in the final quarter of 2022.

Pakistanis switched from the Western Balkan to the Central Mediterranean route

The numbers of Pakistani nationals travelling the Western Balkan route peaked sharply in the middle of 2022, and, just as they declined rapidly thereafter, arrivals at the EU border of Pakistani nationals via the Central Mediterranean route increased until the end of the year (albeit with a trough from August to October). Similarly to Iranians, by the end of 2022, very few Pakistanis were registered in BiH (about 37)⁵¹ and Serbian (about 119)⁵² reception centres.

Registrations of refugees and migrants by WB6 authorities reflected this pattern too. In three municipalities at BiH's border with Croatia, the proportion of Pakistanis found at key locations fell to 11% in the period from 1 September to 15 November, from 42% in previous rounds of IOM's Flow Monitoring survey of 403 refugees and migrants.⁵³ Meanwhile, asylum applications in Austria surged in November 2022 among all major nationalities except Pakistanis, whose applications tapered off (from 1,475 in July to nearly zero in November). Pakistani asylum applications lodged in Italy grew steadily in the second half of the year (from 790 in July to 1,645 in November).

The desire to avoid the Western Balkan route may be a response to the small-scale but symbolic return of Pakistani nationals by BiH for the first time, or to pressure from the police on smuggling networks that specifically assist Pakistanis.⁵⁴

47 Between October and December 2022, Austria reported the withdrawal of 21,235 applications, of which 6,995 (33%) were Afghans. In the same period, Austria received 36,260 new applications, of which 7,580 were submitted by Afghans. This gives a crude withdrawal 'rate' of 59% overall and 92% among Afghans. However, note that there is a lag between logging an application and implicitly or explicitly withdrawing it. The actual proportion of Afghans who lodged their claim during the last three months of 2023 who then withdrew it was not known at the time of writing.

48 IOM. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Situation Response Report," December 2022. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/01_IOM%20BiH%20External%20Sitrep_8%20JANUARY.pdf.

49 Reception centre figures shared 6 January 2023 by DRC Serbia Country Office.

50 First time applications in Germany grew from 415 in July 2022 to 1,060 in November 2022. Source: Eurostat.

51 3% of 1,229. IOM. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Situation Response Report," December 2022. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/01_IOM%20BiH%20External%20Sitrep_8%20JANUARY.pdf.

52 Reception Centre figures shared 6 January 2023 by DRC Serbia Country Office.

53 IOM. "Key Flow Monitoring Points Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina." December 9, 2022. <https://bih.iom.int/resources/iom-bosnia-and-herzegovina-key-flow-monitoring-points-report-una-sana-canton-01-september-15-november-2022>.

54 Media reports in December 2022 said that Spain and BiH had dismantled a smuggling network that assisted Pakistanis in moving to Spain through the Western Balkans. Schengen Visa Info. "Spain Dismantles Criminal Organization That Smuggled Pakistani Immigrants from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Spain." SchengenVisaInfo.com, December 25, 2022. <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/spain-dismantles-criminal-organization-that-smuggled-pakistani-immigrants-from-bosnia-herzegovina-to-spain/>.

Iraqis returned to Western Balkans after closure of Belarus route

Concerning detections of irregular EU-border crossings by Iraqi nationals, the Western Balkan and Central Mediterranean routes were modestly resurgent in 2022, peaking at 367 and 560 detections respectively in the autumn. These routes largely replaced the Eastern Land Borders route⁵⁵ which, while popular in 2021 due to the ease of travel from Baghdad to Minsk, fell into disuse in 2022 as the EU and Iraq worked with airlines to block flights.⁵⁶ From October to December 2022, an average of 433 Iraqis crossed the English Channel to the UK in small boats.⁵⁷

This route-change trend is further evidenced by data about first time asylum applications and subsequent withdrawals. Iraqi asylum applications peaked in Lithuania at 930 and in Latvia at 325 (both in August 2021) and at 330 in Poland (November 2021). That thousands of these applications were subsequently withdrawn lends some statistical credence to what is known anecdotally: that many Iraqis sought to move onwards from these countries once they had entered the EU, undeterred by the threat of return to first countries of asylum under Dublin III. Meanwhile, asylum applications (and withdrawals) began to rise in Greece, Croatia, and, to a lesser extent, Austria, in the summer of 2022. Applications climbed to a temporary high of 630 applications (and 115 withdrawals) in Croatia in September 2022.

55 The 'Eastern Land Borders' comprise the frontiers of Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Norway with Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

56 For some time, Iraqis flew to destinations in Russia instead, but this trend also appears to have become insignificant by the end of the year, probably because of the difficulty in entering Poland and the Baltic countries. For example, in August 2021, Lithuanian border guards were given the legal right to turn away irregular migrants seeking asylum at the border. BNN. "Week in Lithuania: LTG Plans Rail Network Development; Mercenary Brought Back to Lithuania." Baltic News Network (blog), February 18, 2023. <https://bnn-news.com/week-in-lithuania-ltg-plans-rail-network-development-mercenary-brought-back-to-lithuania-243127>.

57 UK government statistics indicate 1,298 Iraqi arrivals in small boats in the final quarter of 2022.

3. Routes and the factors that shape them

Key findings

- In 2022, most arrivals to the Western Balkans were overland, from Türkiye or Greece and entering via the Bulgaria-Serbia and Greece-North Macedonia borders. A smaller proportion with visa-free access to Serbia and BiH arrived by air.
- Smugglers usually directed refugees and migrants' travel through the WB6, choosing border crossings and modes of transport based on their clients' ability to pay. Faster, direct routes with likely police cooperation were the most expensive because they all but guaranteed passage. Longer, physically difficult routes were cheaper.
- While the Serbia-Hungary border crossing remained popular, a relative reduction in Croatian pushbacks may have encouraged more to travel through BiH.
- Refugees and migrants' preferred destinations were highly individual. They often stemmed from the presence there of family and friends, as well as the prospects of reaching and being allowed to stay in a given country, and their perceptions of the degree of available support during the asylum application process.

3.1 Istanbul and Belgrade were key entry points to the Western Balkans

Most refugees and migrants on the Western Balkan route enter by land, from Bulgaria or Greece, having entered Türkiye regularly (in the case of Moroccans, Algerians, sometimes Afghans, Pakistanis, and Iraqis), or irregularly (frequently Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis, and Syrians). Istanbul is a frequent starting point, with refugees and migrants then presented with the choice of travelling to Bulgaria by land, Greece by land, or Greece by sea.⁵⁸

Direct entry to the WB6 from Greece (to North Macedonia or Albania) or from Bulgaria (to Serbia) is often the next step, though some enter Bulgaria from Greece, before continuing onto Serbia. Others exit Bulgaria to the north, rather than travelling through Serbia. Recent checks of lorries trying to enter Hungary found Pakistani nationals among those who had travelled through Bulgaria and Romania before attempting to cross the Hungarian border, bypassing Serbia.⁵⁹

"[Afghan and other] migrants don't have much say until Türkiye because [there is only one route] through the mountains in Iran to Van in Türkiye. That's from Türkiye to Europe, they do have this option of either going through the [forest] to Bulgaria or a boat to a Greek island."

KEY INFORMANT 1, VIENNA

A minority of refugees and migrants enter the Western Balkans by air, variously on journeys via Doha (in the case of Indians) or Moscow or Frankfurt (Cubans) to Belgrade, or via Istanbul to Sarajevo (Russians). Entry via air is dependent on the maintenance of visa-free travel and (informal) policies at departure points—which determine who can board flights—and at destinations, where immigration officers may deny entry if they doubt the stated purpose of travel, such as 'tourism'.

⁵⁸ There is a fourth less commonly used and more expensive route: Italy by sea, which enables travellers to skip the Western Balkan route entirely.

⁵⁹ In November and December 2022, Romanian police intercepted trucks carrying nationals of Bangladesh, Eritrea, Pakistan, and Türkiye attempting to clandestinely enter the EU. See Schengen Visa Info, "Romania: 26 Syrian & Turkish Migrants Caught Trying to Enter Schengen Area in Truck Full of Chemicals." SchengenVisaInfo.com, November 25, 2022. <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/romania-26-syrian-turkish-migrants-caught-trying-to-enter-schengen-area-in-truck-full-of-chemicals/>.

Within the Western Balkans, all six countries are transited, with Kosovo the least used, although even here numbers grew towards the end of 2022 as Serbia strengthened controls on its border with North Macedonia.⁶⁰ While substantial numbers passed through Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and BiH, for most Serbia was a point of convergence (Table 2).

Table 2. Nationalities of which more than 100 irregular migrants were detected in WB6 states in December 2022

	Afghan	Syrian	Moroccan	Iranian	Cuban
Albania	Yes	Yes			
BiH	Yes			Yes	Yes
Montenegro	Yes				
North Macedonia		Yes	Yes	Yes	
Serbia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Kosovo					

Source: IOM⁶¹

3.2 Ability to pay, prospects of success, and fear of violence influenced route choices

The route decisions taken by refugee and migrant interviewees once they had reached the key nodal points of Istanbul and Belgrade were shaped primarily by costs, perceptions of conditions on the route ahead and their own ability to withstand them, and information they had heard about risks arising variously from police violence, the sea, or the cold.

"Greece would have been much harder [to get to from Turkey, than the route I took via Bulgaria]. You spend \$6,000 [on smuggler fees] and you only get to Greece."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

Afghan and Moroccan interviewees favoured the cheaper and more direct route through Bulgaria.⁶² They explained that although pushbacks from Bulgaria to Greece were common, there was more certainty than travelling through Greece, which costs considerably more and still left several countries to pass through before reaching Serbia. Similarly, cost considerations motivated many to exit the WB6 via BiH into Croatia, because doing so by crossing the Drina River was relatively inexpensive,⁶³ particularly when compared to entering Hungary via Serbia. The Serbian border with Hungary is heavily secured but migrants succeed in crossing it, usually with ladders and, as one interviewee explained, 'help from the smugglers' assistants to hold down the barbed wire'.

Several Afghan interviewees said they had avoided travelling through Greece because police there were reported to strip migrants and refugees of their clothing.⁶⁴ Conversely, one said he had chosen the Greece route because of talk of abuse by Bulgarian police. Another Afghan said he planned to continue his journey crossing the BiH-Croatia rather than the Serbia-Hungary border because he had heard that Hungarian police broke mobile phones, and that Croatian police did not.

60 Key informant 8, Belgrade

61 IOM. "Mixed Migratory Flows in the Western Balkans: December 2022," December 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>.

62 An IOM survey corroborated this for Moroccan nationals.

63 Key informants 1 and 5, Belgrade.

64 Interviewees may have been referring to members an auxiliary force that resembled the regular police: although such abuses are well documented, it is not clear who is responsible. See for example, Lock, Samantha. "Greece and Türkiye Trade Blame after 92 Naked Migrants Rescued at Border." The Guardian, October 17, 2022, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/17/greece-and-türkiye-trade-blame-after-92-naked-migrants-rescued-at-border>.

While cost considerations were often the main motivator for some interviewed refugees and migrants—specifically young men travelling without family members—others were wary of physical hardships. Seven Afghans who had crossed Bulgaria described difficult, multi-day walks with limited access to food and water. An Iraqi woman who had travelled through Türkiye, Greece, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia similarly recounted exhausting walks during the nights and sleeping outside during the day (she had in fact been promised a car for some part of the journey that did not materialise):

"We walked for 12 days in Albania. For seven of those we didn't have food. We slept in the woods; it was very cold. The smuggler guide was Syrian. He walked with us. He was a good man."

IRAQI WOMAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

"I think women and children try to avoid the Bulgarian [forest]⁶⁵... They take the bigger risk of going through the waters to Greece [...] and go from there. [It is usually] men who are physically fitter who can endure the difficulties and the hardships [of Bulgaria] but the chances are a bit higher."

KEY INFORMANT 1, VIENNA

Refugees and migrants sometimes travel in the opposite direction to their intended destination. Government-run accommodation centres in Serbia are close enough to the BiH-Croatia border for those who are pushed back at Bihac (in the northwest of BiH) to return to the centres within the 72-hour grace period in which their bed is kept open. It is quite easy to travel back into Serbia from BiH, and returning to BiH again does not necessarily require a smuggler. One Pakistani migrant interviewed in BiH described running out of money there, returning irregularly to Greece to work and earn money, then reattempting the journey.

3.3 Smugglers' influence over routes

Several key informants concurred that smugglers largely determine the routes. Refugees and migrants often engage smugglers who share their language, nationality, or ethnicity. In Serbia especially, there is evidence that smuggling groups of each nationality have preferred exit points and direct their clients through them. Key informants noted, for example, that Afghans and Iraqis commonly attempt to cross the northern border to Hungary but many Syrians, Moroccans, and Somalis⁶⁶ exit through the Romanian border.⁶⁷

Routes and itineraries also vary according to the arrangements agreed between those on the move and their smugglers. The speed of transit through the Western Balkans in 2022 suggests that a significant proportion were relying on package deals, whereby smugglers commit to facilitating passage into, through, and beyond the Western Balkans to the Schengen Area. After refugees and migrants agree to a package deal, they would usually follow the smugglers' lead. Others arrive in Western Balkans without a smuggler, pay a smuggler only to reach Belgrade, or cancel their agreement with the smuggler en route. (These dynamics are discussed in more detail below in the section 'How smuggling works')

"Last year, [Serbia] had a huge influx from people from Burundi. But we never saw them in the north. They did stay longer in the reception centres. Maybe if they were heading off and leaving Serbia, maybe they used some other route. And not the route used by Syrians and Afghans."

KEY INFORMANT 6, BELGRADE

"The whole movement from the south and entering Serbia... then up to north Hungary and Serbia... everything is directed by smugglers... Then the next one is waiting for them. Only those totally out of money go on their own."

KEY INFORMANT 6, BELGRADE

65 36% of Bulgaria is forested, with much of the woodland concentrated in the south, along the border with Greece and directly between major crossing points from Turkey (Edirne) and to Serbia (Piro). Forest area statistics at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.FRST.ZS?locations=BG&most_recent_value_desc=true.

66 Key informant 1, Belgrade

67 Key informant 5, Belgrade

3.4 Routes changed in response to border policy

Towards the end of 2022, BiH increased in popularity as a transit country. Three changes likely contributed to this trend. First, Croatia somewhat relaxed a stringent pushback regime, instead allowing most refugees and migrants seven days to leave the country.⁶⁸ Although some continue to be pushed back and violence continues, thousands passed through and onwards to Slovenia and Italy relatively quickly.⁶⁹ Croatia joined the Schengen zone in January 2023 and has also faced criticism for its treatment of refugees and migrants who try to cross its borders. As a result, Croatia is now under pressure to increase border security while showing that it still respects the basic rights of refugees and migrants. This may lead to greater use of the bilateral readmissions agreement to return third country nationals who enter Croatia irregularly from BiH.⁷⁰

Second, violence at Serbia's northern border with Hungary, reportedly between smuggling groups, may also have played a role in the increasing popularity of the Serbia>BiH>Croatia route towards the end of 2022.⁷¹ Third, awareness of a more circuitous route through the Republica Srpska via Banja Luka appears to have increased in February 2023.⁷²

From Velika Kladuša, a BiH town just a few minutes' drive from the Croatian border, refugees and migrants often aim to walk to the Croatian town of Karlovac, which sits at the intersection of major arteries to Zagreb and Trieste.⁷³ Travel once entering the Schengen area is relatively straightforward. Italian police, who in the past had been involved in chain pushbacks to Slovenia,⁷⁴ have reportedly taken a more relaxed approach, confident that most new arrivals will quickly move onwards to other EU destinations.⁷⁵

3.5 Destination choices follow familiar patterns

Surveys conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2022 suggest that most refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans intend to continue their journeys deep into the Schengen zone, with few planning to remain in Croatia and Hungary. Germany remains a major target for Afghans and Syrians, while Pakistanis and Moroccans prefer Spain and Italy.⁷⁶ Key informants estimated that perhaps a third of those arriving in Italy via Trieste (and therefore probably previously through Western Balkan countries) applied for asylum. Anecdotally, Bangladeshi and Iranian nationals appeared particularly set on applying for asylum and remaining in Italy (though some move on once they realise the difficulty in securing reception accommodation).⁷⁷

The factors that determined the destination choices of refugees and migrants interviewed for this study were often very specific to their individual circumstances. The key factors that they considered, sometimes with quite contrasting conclusions were:

- **Presence of compatriots.** This was a draw for some and more people in common origin countries are likely to have contacts in Europe than ever before. Others viewed popular destinations as 'too full'. For some Afghans, Germany was good but 'too full' and some Syrians regarded Sweden the same way.

68 Key informant 2, Sarajevo. An Afghan man who remained in touch with the author after being interviewed in Belgrade said he was detained in Croatia for five days in a container and then released with the 'seven-day pass'. All in all, it took him almost exactly four weeks to travel from Serbia to Germany.

69 One key informant speculated that there was a '10km rule' and that once refugees and migrants had travelled beyond this distance, pushbacks were less likely.

70 IOM. "Irregular Migration: Bosnia and Herzegovina." Accessed April 17, 2023. <https://bih.iom.int/irregular-migration>.

71 Key informant 5, Belgrade

72 Key informant 7, Sarajevo. Republica Srpska is one of the two entities that make up BiH and is located in its north and east. The other is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

73 Key informant 4, Bihac.

74 Gostoli, Ylenia. "Europe's Chain of Migrant Pushbacks." The New Humanitarian, November 17, 2020. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/17/europe-italy-bosnia-slovenia-migration-pushbacks-expulsion>.

75 Key informant 1, Trieste.

76 1. Two thirds (62%) of Syrians surveyed across the Western Balkans in late 2022 preferred Germany. Non-representative sample of 227. IOM Western Balkans. "Syrians on the Move: Western Balkans." Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/2022/DTM%20Reports/Syrians%20on%20the%20move%202022%20WB.pdf>. 2. One third (32%) of mixed nationals surveyed in Serbia in late 2022 preferred Germany (71% of Syrians, 40% of Afghans - sampled Pakistanis preferred Spain, 11%). non-representative sample of 206. IOM. "Serbia — Flow Monitoring Surveys Report, Round 1 (30 June - 19 September 2022)," October 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/Serbia%20FMS%20Report.pdf>. 3. Half (49%) of Afghans surveyed in BiH in summer 2022 and a quarter of Pakistanis (24%) preferred Germany (51% of Pakistanis preferred Italy). non-representative sample of 303. IOM. "Bosnia & Herzegovina — Flow Monitoring Surveys Report, Round 4 (04 July - 11 September 2022)," October 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/IOM%20BiH%20FMS%20Report%20%281%29.pdf>. 4. Moroccans responding to an IOM survey said they intended to travel to Italy, France, and Spain. IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022".

77 Key informant 1, Trieste.

- **Prospects of success.** The estimated chances of reaching a given country and being allowed to stay there also played a role in decisions. Three Afghans mentioned the speed of asylum processing. They had the impression that Italy was relatively quick at processing documents which would, one believed, facilitate onward travel within the EU (to Germany). One ethnic Pashtun Afghan said he wanted to reach the UK but the additional expense of crossing the English Channel put this out of reach. However, not all interviewees said they would necessarily apply for asylum. Three (two Moroccan, one Palestinian) had already lived in Italy and Austria during previous stints in Europe, after which they were deported. They wished to return there, knowing that they could get work, even without papers.
- **Anticipated support.** An Iranian said he wanted (government) support to integrate, and that this was available in only a handful of countries, identifying France and Germany as examples. Many Afghans, on the other hand, (according to one key informant) consider the support available to asylum seekers in France to be poor.⁷⁸

"In Germany, France, Scandinavian countries...you have support there. You attend free language courses. You receive some aid until you settle down."

IRANIAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

"The majority [want to] join family members and join family members in the EU. Syrians prefer Austria and Germany. They avoid Scandinavian countries like Sweden because they are full of refugees, and they don't accept them."

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

"I learned from them is that France is not good because the money they received is not enough and accommodation is bad."⁷⁹

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

"Not a lot of Afghans know about Austria, they cannot find it on a map... Their main purpose is actually Germany."

KEY INFORMANT 11, VIENNA

⁷⁸ Key informant 1, Belgrade.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

3.6 Information flows about borders and destinations

Information about the route comes mainly through word-of-mouth, in person and online. Migrants are commonly in touch with friends and family via Facebook and WhatsApp.

There are videos on social media platforms such as TikTok, and Facebook showing key border crossing points, for example. It is not unreasonable to expect that someone with a smartphone in Türkiye could get at least some familiarity with the route. As comments on one Facebook post suggest (see inset), seeing visual evidence of successful crossings can be inspiring to someone who perhaps has not yet thought about the journey. The post in question includes several comments where people ask for prices ("8 Lakh [\$9,700] from Serbia to Italy" and "14 Lakh (\$17,100) full [package] India to Italy" was the response of one poster representing himself as a smuggler).

Refugees and migrants certainly passed information about services back along the route. A common question is where to access support at key nodal points. Many migrants arrived in Belgrade, for example, knowing about key locations: the bus station, 'Afghan Park', the now-closed government-run Miksaliste centre, and the still-open information centre run by the NGO Info Park. This gave refugees and migrants access to information about local services, reception centres, and the journey ahead. However, reaching vulnerable groups was challenging for humanitarians and government, with key informants aware that refugees and migrants did their best to avoid contact with service providers.



"There's a lot of walking, jungles, and rivers ahead. I've seen on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

Knowledge among interviewees tended to be incomplete rather than flatly incorrect. There was widespread awareness that the Dublin procedure existed and that being fingerprinted by police or lodging an asylum application in one state might lead to a rejection in another. There was widespread knowledge about exceptions to the rule too. For example, several interviewees knew that being fingerprinted in Bulgaria and Greece was less of an issue, because Western EU states were unable to effect returns, often blocked by national courts citing protection concerns. Similarly, most migrants knew they had to claim asylum if intercepted by police (one key informant said Burundians arriving at Belgrade's international airport did not necessarily know this).

Refugee and migrant interviewees showed that knowledge of asylum procedures and documentation was shaky. For example, most struggled to differentiate between papers associated with asylum status and the much longer process of obtaining a passport via citizenship. Others thought that asylum claims started in one country would be continued in the next. Key informants also spoke of applicants' dismay when they discovered that procedures must begin afresh and noted that some refugees and migrants had a poor grasp of European geography.

"They assumed that once they were in the system in Serbia, they would continue the procedure they started here [once they reached another country]. It is especially devastating for those who stay a year or more, build some kind of a life here, then they need to start all over, like five steps backwards."

KEY INFORMANT 2, BELGRADE

"We had a tonne of conversations when they were saying 'Germany, Germany'. Then you ask in which city, and they say 'Vienna'."

KEY INFORMANT 2, BELGRADE

3.7 Protection prospects vary by nationality

At least implicit in the decision-making of most people on the move is that their preferred destination will ultimately allow them to stay and deportation is unlikely. Interviewees never referred explicitly to any country's acceptance rates for asylum applications. However, like the Afghans mentioned above who compared the speed of paperwork processing in Italy and Germany, they did talk about the prospects and speed of obtaining documents that permit some form of residency. A Bangladeshi intending to travel to Italy, for example, said he had decided against France because he had heard he would not get papers there. And a Moroccan wanted to go to Italy because he heard from others that he would get papers there. Some Moroccan interviewees were an exception: they had either not considered the need to apply for asylum or said they did not intend to do so, knowing they were unlikely to receive it and believing they could find work without papers.

In 2022, Afghans and Syrians could be rather confident that once they reached the EU they would receive some form of international protection with their protection needs positively recognised across the EU at rates of 85% and 94% respectively (Table 3).⁸⁰ Afghans fared best in Germany and the Netherlands and much less well in France. Syrians' prospects were high in Austria and the Netherlands.

Asylum applicants from Iran (44% of whom were granted favourable first instance decisions across the EU in 2022), Iraq (35%), Pakistan (15%), and Cuba ⁸¹(13%) were much less certain to receive protection. However, this varied significantly by country of application, with Italy and the Netherlands considerably more likely than the rest of the EU to recognise claims from these nationals (Table 3). Pakistanis fared best in the Netherlands and Italy,⁸² and Iranians in Austria, the Netherlands, and Italy. Afghan, Syrian, and Eritrean applicants in the UK were almost certain to receive protection (98% recognition rate) and Iranians (82%) were also very likely to.⁸³ Just over half (56%) of Pakistanis' UK applications were successful, while Indians were usually refused (4%). UK rates of protection granted to nationals of Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq were at least 15 percentage points higher than the EU average.⁸⁴

80 Eurostat, First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data, accessed 18 April 2023.

81 Cubans lodged a record 4,010 first asylum applications across the EU in 2022, mostly in Spain and Croatia. Eurostat, Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data, accessed 18 April 2023.

82 Though note the small sample size, with just 65 first time applications.

83 Recognition rates for decisions made between January and September 2022. UK Home Office (2022) [National statistics - How many people do we grant protection to?](#)

84 Author's calculation, based on Home Office (January-September 2022) and Eurostat (statistics on first instance decisions).

Table 3. Acceptance rates ('total positive decisions') among first instance asylum decisions⁸⁵ % variation between EU-wide average and individual member states 2022

	EU-wide avg	Germany	France	Austria	Netherlands	Italy	Spain
Eritrea	85%	2%	-15%	-7%	-2%	2%	15%
Cuba	13%	-6%	8%	-13%	62%	39%	-10%
Afghanistan	85%	11%	-16%	9%	14%	11%	14%
Iran	44%	-5%	-2%	27%	35%	45%	3%
Iraq	35%	-8%	9%	22%	47%	50%	-19%
Pakistan	15%	2%	-9%	-14%	72%	19%	-11%
Syria	94%	2%	-14%	4%	2%	-11%	-6%
India	2%	2%	3%	-2%	-2%	30%	-2%
Morocco	8%	2%	17%	-7%	1%	29%	-2%

Table 4. Number of favourable first instance asylum decisions issued by EU states 2022

	EU-wide avg	Germany	France	Austria	Netherlands	Italy	Spain
Eritrea	8,580	3,470	1,480	45	490	190	75
Cuba	1,550	65	300	5	20	115	905
Afghanistan	83,145	38,370	16,895	2,415	2,460	4,215	1,555
Iran	7,110	3,740	350	310	395	90	140
Iraq	26,785	18,195	505	475	610	700	90
Pakistan	25,365	1,425	3,395	4,045	275	7,740	635
Syria	10,6895	70,595	2,210	11,525	6,360	385	1,470
India	8,090	250	295	4,810	60	190	50
Morocco	10,780	605	430	3,685	180	865	4,320

⁸⁵ Eurostat, Decisions granting refugee status or subsidiary protection, annual data.

4. Migration drivers

Key findings

- Poor prospects in what come to be transit countries—especially increased returns by Türkiye—were central to refugees and migrants' motivations to travel to Europe.
- Family reunification strategies, whereby one member of the family migrates first in the hope that their kin will later be permitted to join them via legal channels, are common and a factor in the high proportion of men on the route.
- Selective visa-free access made the route attractive to Indians, Tunisians, Burundians, Cubans (to Serbia) and Russians (to BiH) for a period before policy changes closed off such legal pathways to most.

4.1 Safety, governance, and economics make life difficult at home

Many on the Western Balkan route come from countries with considerable political instability. Conditions in the two most dominant countries of origin, Syria and Afghanistan, continue to present serious risks to the safety of much of their populations, especially women and girls living under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. In Iran, the widespread protests that followed the suspicious death in custody in September 2022 of 22-year-old student Mahsa Amini were met with a harsh government response that included the execution of protestors. Pakistan saw severe floods, a foreign exchange crisis, and terrorist attacks, within the span of a few short months. Meanwhile, Morocco and Algeria were relatively stable and as a result were often considered by EU countries to be 'safe'.⁸⁶ However, they were also characterised by authoritarian governments and high youth unemployment.

As ever, any individual decision to leave home is a complex one, with neat 'push factors' often difficult to identify and the dynamics driving decisions and movements varying significantly between individuals who, in the statistics, might look alike. For example, two ethnically Pashtun Afghans transiting the Western Balkans in the hopes of reaching Germany had extremely diverse motivations and back stories. One said he was a former employee of a Western military force who had been excluded from the evacuations of vulnerable Afghans that took place amid the withdrawal of US and NATO forces in 2021 and who had since moved between several safe houses. The other was a subsistence farmer who spent years in Pakistan and was hoping to put the struggles of earning a living behind him.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 featured prominently during interviews with Afghans in Belgrade and Sarajevo and was followed by an uptick in Afghan arrivals in the Western Balkans.⁸⁷ Several Afghan interviewees cited the challenging economic climate in their country, itself an effect of the withdrawal of international aid and de facto sanctions on aspects of the country's economy. For example, two Afghan farmers who had been used to migrating in the farming off-season to work in the Pakistani city of Peshawar decided to go to Europe when they felt that pattern was no longer viable.⁸⁸

Moroccan and Algerian interviewees described abject poverty and difficulty making a living in tightly controlled environments. The motivations to move to Europe were certainly economic at heart: most Moroccans responding to an IOM survey conducted in Serbian reception centres in December 2022 were men under the age of 29 who had left Morocco in the hope of finding work and boosting their income.⁸⁹ But the difference between those driven by aspiration and necessity were stark. One multilingual Moroccan graduate, for example, aspired to further his education in Europe,

86 The safe countries of origin concept is applied by states individually (i.e. there is no unifying EU directive). 22 EU countries have adopted lists. Morocco appears on 9 of them. European Union Agency for Asylum. "Applying the Concept of Safe Countries in the Asylum Procedure." LU: Publications Office, 2022. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/430441>.

87 IOM. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022," February 2023.

88 They didn't explain this in great detail, but described Pakistan as "finished".

89 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022".

whereas another Moroccan said he believed the the only way to provide his elderly father with the support he needed was to find work in Italy, even he was unable to procure regular documents.

"I'm very poor, from the countryside... The government is [so] strict that even if I tried to work informally in Rabat, selling things, the police would not allow it."

MOROCCAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN SARAJEVO

4.2 Intolerable conditions in transit states

In some cases, conditions in a previous country of transit played a greater role in the presence of refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans than did the situation in countries of origin.

Many refugees and migrants in the WB6—including Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, and Moroccans interviewed for this study—had lived in Türkiye for months or even years. A survey of 227 Syrians in the Western Balkans found that 40% had previously been living in Türkiye for over a year.⁹⁰ Others had spent substantial amounts of time in Pakistan and Iran, or in Greece. Many had moved to these countries with no initial intention of continuing to Europe. Others had travelled with the intention of eventual onward movement, for example after saving or paying debts. Others still had intended to transit quickly but were held up by smugglers or police detention.

Regardless of the initial reasons for travelling, interviewees for this study were clear that deteriorating conditions in Türkiye motivated them to move on. Four Afghans and one Syrian said their reasons for leaving Türkiye centred on their fear of forcible return (in 2022, Türkiye more than doubled the removals of Afghans by air to Kabul).⁹¹ Two Afghans mentioned the lack of prospects for acquiring any durable status in Türkiye.

Further upstream, crossing the Zagros mountains between Iran and Türkiye during winter is extremely difficult,⁹² which may explain why most of the interviewees in this winter-time study had in fact travelled from Türkiye or Greece, having spent months or years there. Spring may see greater numbers depart from countries of origin.

"We noticed that there are women from Iraq and Syria from Türkiye [who] spend two to three weeks or a month [here], then they leave Serbia. They probably want time to rest [before] they continue the journey."

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

"Many of them left Afghanistan two or three years ago or even earlier, but they were stuck in Türkiye or Greece and then decided to continue their journey now."

KEY INFORMANT 10, BELGRADE

Some Afghans and a Moroccan interviewee said that the economic situation in Türkiye had become untenable. Although they had found work there, wages were low and sometimes went unpaid, and harassment by police had become common.⁹³ Others had intended to reach Europe but got stuck en route due to COVID-19, which made it harder to save the requisite funds to continue their journey.⁹⁴

90 IOM Western Balkans. "Syrians on the Move: Western Balkans." <https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdj1076/files/2022/DTM%20Reports/Syrians%20on%20the%20move%202022%20WB.pdf>.

91 The total for the first eight months of 2022 was 44,748, a 150% increase over the same period in 2021. Turkish figures cited by: Human Rights Watch (2022) [Türkiye Pushes Afghans Back at Iran Border](#).

92 Some key informants thought these were virtually impossible to cross during winter, though acknowledged that some people still try and succeed. For example, Key informant 1, Vienna.

93 Afghan interviewees said they earned about €200 monthly working in Türkiye. One Afghan interviewee worked in a garment factory a Moroccan interviewee waited tables in Istanbul. Similarly, a Bangladeshi interviewee who had worked in Greece said the extremely low salary had prompted him to move on.

94 ICMPD. "Analyse der Zusammenhänge zwischen Schutz, Entwicklungschancen und Entscheidungen über irreguläre Migration in einem Transitland," June 2022. https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/58145/file/IKAM%2520Final%2520Report_DE_2022.pdf.

"I spoke to some families that arrived in the north of Serbia. [They had] left Syria in 2014, spent six to seven years in Türkiye, then last year they decided to leave Türkiye because they were afraid of being returned to Syria."

KEY INFORMANT 6, BELGRADE

"My original plan was just to go to Türkiye. The government then started harassing Afghans and returning them."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN VIENNA

"Let's say if someone in Türkiye works the same job that pays locals 6,000 lira [€300], [because he isn't Turkish] they will pay them 2000 lira [€100]."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

"I would have stayed in Türkiye if only I could have received the papers... Integration into Turkish society [is easier] due to the [religious and cultural] similarities... Istanbul is one of the best places I had a chance to stay."

PAKISTANI MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BIHAC

4.3 Family reunification strategies

Many refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans have family members at countries of origin, transit, or intended destination. Interviewees explained that one member of their household (usually a man, often a boy, and sometimes a woman or girl), had set out alone from origin or transit countries in the hope of receiving asylum and bringing other family members later via legal family reunification channels.⁹⁵ Two Afghans who had travelled from Türkiye described leaving the family unit in Istanbul, with the intention to reunite later. Key informants confirmed they frequently observed the same trend from Türkiye and Greece.⁹⁶

"In 2015, we had a lot of families. Now it is 93% single men, [so] less than 10% families. There were 286 unaccompanied minors and six unaccompanied girls and 1% are women. UACs [unaccompanied children] are mostly Afghan and Pakistani."

KEY INFORMANT 4, BELGRADE

"I've spoken to a few Afghans who have family members in reception centres in Italy but haven't yet been able to join them."

KEY INFORMANT 3, BELGRADE

⁹⁵ These accounts echo the findings of IOM surveys conducted in the Western Balkans in 2022. Most respondent parents in BiH (58%) and Serbia (91%), for example, said they had left at least one child in their country of origin. In Serbia, 19% of 206 respondents said they were parents, of whom 91% said they had a child in their country of origin. In BiH, 28% of 303 respondents said they were parents, of whom 58% said they had a child in the country of origin.. See IOM. "Serbia — Flow Monitoring Surveys Report, Round 1 (30 June - 19 September 2022)," October 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/Serbia%20FMS%20Report.pdf>. IOM. "Bosnia & Herzegovina — Flow Monitoring Surveys Report, Round 4 (04 July - 11 September 2022)," October 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/IOM%20BiH%20FMS%20Report%20%281%29.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Key informant 1, Belgrade.

4.4 Evolving visa requirements

Since they are mostly unable to obtain the visas required to board planes bound for the EU (or other intended destinations), most refugees and migrants can only enter the bloc irregularly by land or sea. However, nationals of certain countries are able to fly at least part of the way, reducing the amount of travel they need to take overland (Table 5) to reach Europe. This makes Western Balkans countries attractive places to start journeys and sometimes end them.⁹⁷

The ending of visa-free entry by Serbia and Montenegro for key nationalities that were using the route⁹⁸ (Indian, Tunisian, and Burundian nationals) in 2022 and 2023 is clearly associated with a reduction in asylum applications from those nationalities (see below), as was Serbia's ending of visa-free entry for Iranians in 2018. Indian nationals, most of whom appear to be from the Punjab region, typically flew into Serbia and many worked temporarily before continuing journeys. Cuban nationals, whose visa-free access remained in place, became increasingly prevalent, though absolute numbers were relatively low.

Russian nationals—in particular those from Muslim-majority Chechnya and Ingushetia—who enjoy visa-free entry to Serbia and BiH, also arrived in the Western Balkan route in increasing numbers. Russians continued to arrive in BiH in 2023, usually having flown in via Istanbul, many with the intention of reaching the EU. In mid-February 2023, 13,000 Russian nationals were reported to have entered the country in the previous two months, mostly by air.⁹⁹ The EU's requirement that BiH—like all candidate members of the bloc—harmonize visa rules with the EU's own has met resistance from the Serb-majority, largely pro-Russian Republica Srpska.¹⁰⁰ Greater numbers may arrive as the Russia-Ukraine war continues and pressure on regions such as Chechnya to send more fighters ramps up. Russian applications for asylum in the EU rose seven-fold between January and November 2022, with Croatia becoming the single largest country of application.¹⁰¹

Table 5. Status of visa regimes in Western Balkans and Turkey¹⁰²

Nationals of	Visa regime	Status
Cuba	Visa-free to Serbia	Current
Türkiye	Visa-free to Serbia	Current
Russia	Visa-free to Serbia and BiH	Current
India	Visa-free to Serbia	Ended January 2023
Burundi	Visa-free to Serbia	Ended October 2022
Tunisia	Visa-free to Serbia	Ended November 2022 ¹⁰³
Guinea-Bissau	Visa-free to Serbia	Ended January 2023
Iran	Visa-free to Serbia	Ended October 2018
Morocco	Visa-free to Türkiye	Current
Algeria	Under 15s and over 65s only are visa-free	Current

97 Across the Western Balkans, more than 38,000 refugees and migrants said they intended to seek asylum there in 2022, although only 1,383 (198 of them from Burundi, a visa-exempt nationality for much of the year) filed out the necessary application forms. See [UNHCR, Western Balkans Asylum Dashboard](#).

98 Serbia also ended visa-free travel for Bissau-Guinean nationals but this appears pre-emptive, with only 25 detections of irregular border crossings on the Western Balkan route in 2022 and 68 across EU routes. Frontex. 'Detections of Irregular Border Crossings', accessed 27 March 2023.

99 Sarajevo Times. "13,000 Russians Entered Bosnia and Herzegovina." Sarajevo Times February 18, 2023. <https://sarajevotimes.com/13-000-russians-entered-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

100 Ibid.

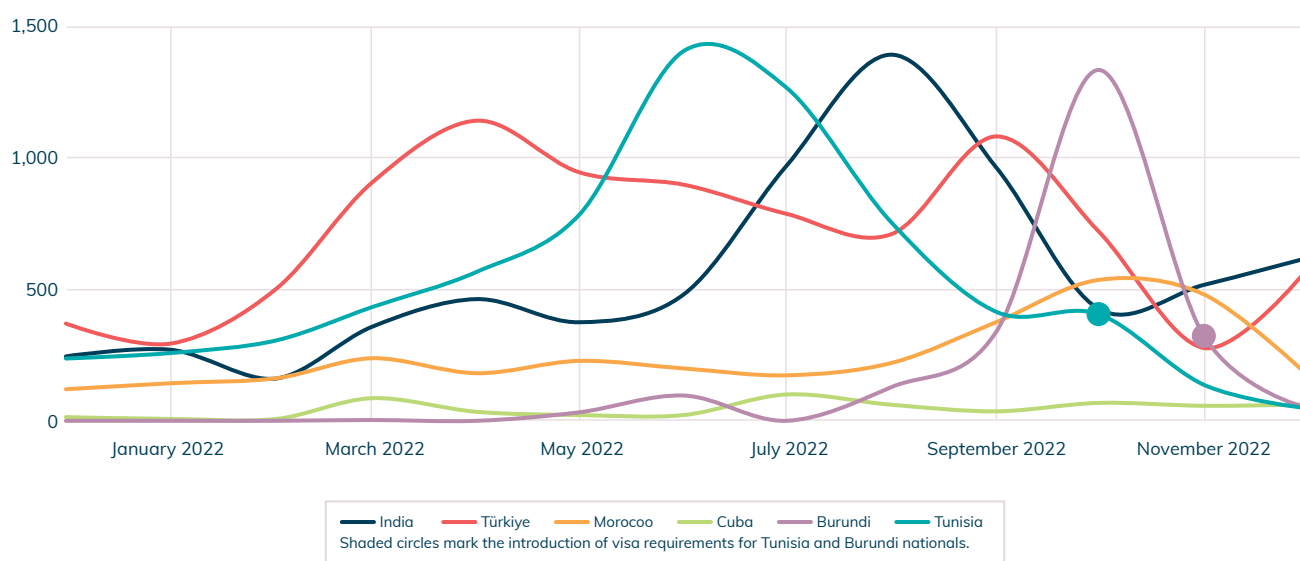
101 Eurostat. Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - monthly data. Accessed 27 March 2023.

102 Current data true as of 24 February 2023, according to <https://www.emirates.com/in/english/before-you-fly/visa-passport-information/>.

103 Dragojlo, Sasa. "Serbia Ends Visa-Free Regimes with Tunisia and Burundi." Balkan Insight, October 25, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/25/serbia-ends-visa-free-regimes-with-tunisia-and-burundi/>.

The ending of visa-free regimes probably had some effect in reducing irregular entries into the EU and asylum claims lodged there by affected nationals. Although other factors influence routes and applications, and the timing of trends versus policy announcements is not neatly sequenced – the general downward trend of irregular detections and asylum numbers, suggests some kind of link. There was a peak in irregular detections of Burundians on the Western Balkan route immediately prior to the ban, suggesting a now-or-never burst of arrivals (Figure 6). There were Tunisian and Indian peaks too, although these occurred several months prior to the introduction of visa requirements, perhaps a function of the timing of the announcement in the media and informally via smuggler and migrant networks. Asylum applications in key EU countries before and after the introduction of visa requirements to some extent corroborate this. Indian applications in Austria dropped from 3,890 in September 2022 to 365 by December (in fact, before the visa requirement was in place); Burundian applications in Croatia from 705 in November 2022 to 10 in January 2023; Tunisian applications in Austria from 2,460 in October 2022 to 165 in December 2022.

Figure 6. Detections of irregular entry on the Western Balkan route of nationals of countries permitted to enter Serbia without a visa (plus Morocco)



Source: Frontex¹⁰⁴

4.5 State-imposed obstacles

Authorities in Serbia and BiH have largely centred their attempts to disrupt or impede irregular migration on establishing logistical obstacles. Some refugees and migrants will have merely been slowed by a few days, making government actions inconvenient but surmountable. However, this does not mean they have no influence on arrivals: the corresponding increase in the cost of migration may have priced others out entirely.

Migrants and refugees continue to travel through the Western Balkans region despite pushbacks and readmissions, with the willingness to attempt crossings repeatedly evidence that they often amount to only a temporary set back. The prospect of return to home countries may be a bigger deterrent. When the BiH government followed up on a 2020 readmission agreement with Pakistan with the return in August 2022 of two Pakistani nationals¹⁰⁵—reportedly the first case in the region of forced repatriations—¹⁰⁶ there appeared to be a drop-off in the number of Pakistanis transiting the country.¹⁰⁷ Moroccans have been returned too, despite the lack of a formal readmissions agreement, but numbers transiting BiH remain significant. In 2022, there were very few voluntary returns from the region.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Data from Frontex. "Migratory Map." Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>.

¹⁰⁵ Kurtic, Azem. "Bosnia Deports Two Pakistani Migrants 'as Test Case.'" Balkan Insight, August 1, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/01/bosnia-deports-two-pakistani-migrants-as-test-case/>.

¹⁰⁶ Sarajevo Times (2022) [BiH is the first in the Region to start the forced Deportations of Migrants](#).

¹⁰⁷ At the end of the year, just 3% of 1,229 occupants of reception centres in Bosnia & Herzegovina were Pakistani compared to 25% of 1,615 in May 2022. See IOM's situation reports at <https://bih.iom.int/situation-reports>, accessed 4 April 2023.

¹⁰⁸ In 2023, IOM assisted 17 people to return to their countries of origin, mostly from Serbia. They were nationals of India (5), Morocco (3), and Pakistan and China (2 each). IOM. "Western Balkans Mixed Migration Flows Report," February 2023. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/WB%20Mixed%20Migration%20Flows%20Report%20%20-%20January%202023.pdf>.

"The main issue is that Serbia has a very large green border that is reasonably easy to cross; you can't build a fence around Serbia."

KEY INFORMANT 4, BELGRADE

Table 6. Measures adopted to disrupt irregular migration/smuggling

Measure	Consequence	Estimated delay to journey ¹⁰⁹	Examples
Automatically push back migrants on detection at borders	Migrant must reattempt the crossing or find an alternative route	1-5 days	Hungary pushed back some 150,000 attempts to cross its border in 2022, with some migrants trying 10-15 ¹¹⁰ or even 20-30 ¹¹¹ times before being able to cross
Increase number and quality of border patrols	Migrants are more likely to be intercepted when attempting to cross, and so must make more attempts	1-30 days, depending on migrants' luck and access to smugglers	Following Austrian and Hungarian pressure, ¹¹² key informants reported a reduction of arrivals to Preševo in the south, from "about 500 to 150 per day". ¹¹³
Conduct police checks on public buses	Migrants must pay for a taxi or walk long distances to avoid detection	1-5 days, depending on funds	BiH police checks on busses from Sarajevo to Bihac
Arrest migrants and relocate them as far from the border as possible	Migrants must cross the country again, incurring extra expense	1-5 days depending on funds	In November 2022, Serbian police relocated migrants arrested near the Hungarian border to centres near the North Macedonian border
Close cafes and hostels where smugglers are known to operate	Smugglers must work harder to connect with incoming migrants	0-1 days, as smugglers are present in squats and reception centres	In 2022, Belgrade authorities closed cafes around 'Afghan Park' in the centre of the city.
Prevent certain visa-exempt nationals from boarding at origin, or end visa-free access entirely	Migrants must depart from a different airport	Indefinitely for those unable to afford travel from an alternative airport. A few days for those determined to fly from alternative airports	While visa-free, a key informant reported that Burundian nationals were sometimes denied boarding at origin. ¹¹⁴ Denial of boarding at origin to Cuban nationals who would otherwise be able to enter Serbia visa free. ¹¹⁵ Refusal of entry at international airports in Belgrade and Sarajevo

¹⁰⁹ Author's estimate based on migrant interviews.

¹¹⁰ Key informant 8, Belgrade.

¹¹¹ Key informant 6, Belgrade.

¹¹² Gec, Jovana. "Austria, Hungary Equipping Serbia to Curb Border Crossings." AP NEWS, October 6, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-hungary-migration-austria-94d5fe32eacf226611ac42f5c3147c36>.

¹¹³ Key informant 8, Belgrade.

¹¹⁴ Not verified; key informant had heard this was happening. Key informant 5, Belgrade..

¹¹⁵ Jenkins, Stuart. "Cubans Are Not Allowed to Board a Plane from Holguin to Serbia." SmallCapNews.Co.Uk (blog), December 2, 2022. <https://www.smallcapnews.co.uk/cubans-are-not-allowed-to-board-a-plane-from-holguin-to-serbia/>.

5. Why refugees and migrants tend not to settle in the Western Balkans

Key findings

- Most refugees and migrants who have travelled overland to the Western Balkans leave quickly. Less than 1% of arrivals have asylum claims seriously considered by WB6 authorities.
- Refugees and migrants do not feel that protection is on offer. Meanwhile, authorities often doubt that asylum applicants are serious in their intentions to stay.
- Some refugees and migrants do stay, often involuntarily at first, then with more intention as they spend more time and feel more settled.

5.1 Refugees and migrants feel they cannot stay

Interviewed refugees and migrants felt remaining in Serbia or BiH was not a viable option and that doing so might limit their chances of moving on at a later stage. ‘They don’t offer asylum’ was a common refrain. Interviewed refugees and migrants often expressed apathy towards Western Balkan countries rather than outright hostility. This was in contrast for example to perceptions of Bulgaria as outrightly hostile to new arrivals.

“Migrants are seeing Serbians leave too, so it’s hard to persuade them that there is a good future in Serbia.”

KEY INFORMANT 9, BELGRADE

“Bulgarian people are not helpful, not nice. If they see you, they will call the police. [On the other hand], Serbian people are nice.”

MOROCCAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BIHAC

The few refugees and migrant interviewees who were seriously considering staying in the Western Balkans were wary of integration challenges and limits to future freedoms should they succeed in obtaining some kind of protected status. Serbia does not issue travel documents to asylees, despite provisions in the 2018 Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection,¹¹⁶ nor does it offer pathways to citizenship.¹¹⁷

“Reaching Germany and some other EU country is some kind of success. If you try to stay in some country along the route, you’ll be considered as a failure.”

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

“[I did not apply for asylum in Serbia because] I want to find a country where I can have a good life.”

IRANIAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

¹¹⁶ Bylaws envisaged under the act were not passed. A challenge in the Constitutional Court failed, and a subsequent challenge was lodged at the European Court of Human Rights. Kovacevic, Nikola. “Country Report: Serbia,” May 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AIDA-SR_2021update.pdf.

¹¹⁷ This was a cross-cutting issue in interviews conducted with 13 refugees who remained in Serbia in 2022. An exception is children who obtain humanitarian residence, who can eventually become citizens. See Goodwin, Zachary. “Why I Stayed: Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees.” KlikAktiv, 2022. <https://klikaktiv.org/journal/why-i-stayed-asylum-integration-and-futures-in-serbia-through-the-eyes-of-13-refugees>.

Children may want to stay in Western Balkan states but feel pressure from families to continue to the EU or the UK. Although Serbia's 2018 Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection provides explicit provisions on the protection of children,¹¹⁸ key informants gave several examples of minors who had left Serbia despite having viable pathways to protection and residence there. In some cases, minors they were still in touch with expressed their desire to return to Serbia once they had secured papers in Western European countries.

"We had cases where we worked with minors. We started procedures. But then someone from home is pressing them to go further. 99% of them already have someone in the EU."

KEY INFORMANT 4, BELGRADE

5.2 Asylum process hurdles

Practical issues make it difficult even for those who are inclined to remain in Serbia or BiH to do so. Those who lodge protection claims must wait nine months before being allowed to work and usually have no prospect of obtaining cash assistance in the meantime. Work is available but exploitation is common. The ID cards issued by temporary reception centres are handwritten, just one of the reasons why banking and money exchange services are reluctant to deal with refugees and migrants.¹¹⁹

While WB6 asylum laws and systems are largely modelled on those of the EU, relatively small numbers of refugees and migrants have applications accepted and assessed, and even fewer are granted some form of protection.¹²⁰ Across the Western Balkans, 1,383 people actually filed asylum claims in 2022, just 4% of the 38,418 who expressed an intention to seek asylum (the vast majority in BiH) and 0.7% of the 192,226 registered arrivals that year.¹²¹ The majority of assessed claims were in filed Serbia, which in 2022 granted protection in 30 of 93 assessed cases.¹²²

Serbia, as host to the largest number of refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans, provides a useful case study of the range of challenges faced in claiming asylum.¹²³

1. First, asylum seekers must successfully enter the territory of Serbia and register to obtain a Certificate of Expressed Intention to Seek Asylum.¹²⁴ This temporarily regularises their stay, protecting them from removal and granting them access to temporary reception centres. Under-resourcing and, reported refusals of some police to register claims, and the closure of the Miksalište information point¹²⁵ in Belgrade have made this more difficult.

"In Belgrade, it's a huge problem to get registration... if someone arrives to Serbia and wants to register, it's really hard... they say come tomorrow..."

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

"There were some cases where police officers refused to accept applications... We heard in Preševo from another organisation that the police stopped issuing registration certificates but then they restarted..."

KEY INFORMANT 3, BELGRADE

¹¹⁸ Key informant 5, Belgrade.

¹¹⁹ Key informant 8, Belgrade.

¹²⁰ In first instance decisions across the Western Balkans in 2022, refugee status was given to 22 applicants, 100 received a 'complementary form of protection', while 158 claims were rejected. UNHCR (2023) [Western Balkans – Asylum Dashboard](#).

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² The highest number of claims overall were in fact filed in Kosovo but 96% were 'otherwise closed', indicating the applicant became uncontactable, likely because they left the country.

¹²³ The Serbian procedure is governed by the 2018 Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection. See also: UNHCR, "Between Closed Borders 2020-21: Joint Agency Paper on Refugees and Migrants in Serbia 2020 and 2021," January 10, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/between-closed-borders-2020-21-joint-agency-paper-refugees-and-migrants-serbia-2020>.

¹²⁴ In 2022, BiH issued 106,905 of these, Serbia 30,826, and Montenegro 27,556. UNHCR (2023) [Western Balkans Asylum Dashboard](#).

¹²⁵ The Miksalište, initially opened by volunteers, was subsequently run by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration to provide a first point of contact between government and new arrivals. It was closed temporarily in 2016 and then again on 1 January 2023.

2. Second, those who have expressed their intention to seek asylum must then submit a formal application to the Asylum Office. Navigating the process can require significant will-power on the part of the applicant. Processing officers, supporting lawyers, NGOs etc. may not believe that the person applying genuinely wants to stay in Serbia and therefore may be less inclined to put effort into the case. This is not without reason: key informants described devoting considerable time and effort processing asylum and resettlement cases, only for the applicant to 'disappear', thereby effectively withdrawing their claim.¹²⁶ (Refugees and migrants pursuing a full application may genuinely be open to staying and/or, not knowing how real their prospects actually are, wish to keep as many options open to them as possible.) Similarly, those seeking asylum spoke of having to dispel officials' doubts that they actually wanted to stay in Serbia.¹²⁷

"It seems that international protection is reserved for pretty vulnerable cases, for example, if it is a victim of gender-based violence. They have to have a high standard of proof. Also if they are victims of torture. If they are children from Syria, they are granted asylum. [Applicants have to] put in a lot of effort."

KEY INFORMANT 3, BELGRADE

3. Third, processing claims takes time. Once applications are lodged, initial decisions are delivered within '12 to 14 months on average', considerably longer than the 3 months stipulated in the Law on Asylum.¹²⁸ COVID-19 likely affected this, with 222 decisions taken in 2020 and 147 in 2021, then rising to 353 in 2022 after restrictions were lifted.
4. Fourth, recognition rates are low, even if certain groups were more likely to be recognised. In 2022, Serbia made 353 decisions, of which 122 (35%) received some kind of protection.¹²⁹ In 2022, key informants described the Asylum Office as being more open to claims from children and victims of torture, such as young Afghan boys feeling threatened having to fight for the Taliban, and children from Syria. Applications from certain groups were mostly treated as without merit, for example adult Afghan men, Burundians, and Moroccans.¹³⁰ The Asylum Commission, as the second instance body, rarely sends cases back for reconsideration.¹³¹

5.3 Those eligible for resettlement are unwilling to wait

For a limited number of refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans, there may be regular channels through which they could reach a third country. Some Afghans encountered by key informants in Serbia, for example, were likely eligible for resettlement under the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), but indicated they preferred the speed and supposedly better prospects of obtaining asylum after irregular overland migration to other European countries over waiting for resettlement to the United States.¹³²

Similar uncertainty surrounds the future of hundreds of the Afghans who are still in Albania after evacuating from Afghanistan in late 2021.¹³³ Some may be eligible for resettlement in the US, but the process is slow and convoluted, while funding for their continued stay in Albania is strained. They may become a source—albeit a relatively small one—of future movement.

126 Key informant 4, Belgrade. In 2022, the cases of some 23,524 asylum applications across the Western Balkans were classified as 'otherwise closed', in other words, terminated before a first instance decision was made.

127 Goodwin, Zachary. "Why I Stayed: Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees." KlikAktiv, 2022. <https://klikaktiv.org/journal/why-i-stayed-asylum-integration-and-futures-in-serbia-through-the-eyes-of-13-refugees>.

128 Kovacevic, Nikola. "Country Report: Serbia," May 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AIDA-SR_2021update.pdf.

129 UNHCR (2023) [Western Balkans Asylum Dashboard](#), accessed 18 April 2023.

130 Key informant 3, Belgrade.

131 Ibid.

132 Those who worked for the US government or US military in Afghanistan continue to be eligible for relocation to the US. Since the end of the evacuations in 2021, USRAP has required applicants to move to a country with US representation (i.e. not Afghanistan or Iran). However, it does not provide any support for them to do so, and applicants must source their own financial support. With applications taking upwards of a year to process, some applicants run out of money or patience.

133 Tsouko, Ilir. "The Wrong Plane out of Afghanistan." Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/afghanistan-evacuees-albania/>.

5.4 Some stay for longer than anticipated

As noted above (see 'Shorter stays signal faster movements') for most refugees and migrants on the Western Balkan route, contact with communities and institutions there is fleeting. Financial, health or other factor usually underlie decisions to remain for longer than average periods. Families often stay longer in the reception centres, for example, because it is considerably more expensive for them to move on and harder for them to earn money. It is more expensive because they have more members to pay for. It is more difficult for them to work and earn the money they need to travel while caring for their children.¹³⁴

Seasons also play a role in duration of stay, with some refugees and migrants keen to wait for favourable weather before attempting certain legs of the journey. For example, several interviewees said they were waiting in reception centres in Belgrade, anticipating warmer weather, and keen to avoid squats near the border that are crowded during the summer months. Winter also reduces vegetation cover, which might make apprehension more likely, although the thermal sensors in use at the Croatian border would make this less relevant.

¹³⁴ Key informant 8, Belgrade.

6. How human smuggling works

Key findings

- Refugees and migrants commonly engage smugglers from their own national, linguistic, or ethnic networks. These smugglers coordinate journeys, working remotely with compatriots and locals in transit countries.
- Package deals promise arrival at a specified destination, often with advance lump sum payments held in escrow by informal money changers and released in tranches after each successful border crossing.
- Less well-off refugees and migrants may not use a smuggler at all, or engage one only for certain legs of the journey, paying up front in cash to cross a particular border.

6.1 Unpacking the networks

Human smugglers are diverse in identity, how they work, and who they work with. While the Palermo Protocol confines its definition of the smuggling of migrants to the facilitation of their illegal entry into a country in return for a material benefit,¹³⁵ on the ground, the business of human smuggling encompasses a much broader range of actors and actions than this.¹³⁶ The following identifies seven key roles, some of which are performed by the same individuals.¹³⁷

1. **Package dealers / coordinators** put together long-range, multi-country travel arrangements. For those taking the Western Balkan route, packages may start in origin countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, or in transit countries, such as Iran. Some packages end in EU states, others in what might come to be transit countries, such as Türkiye. Coordinators are often of the same nationality as their customers.¹³⁸ A 2016 study reported that Afghans on this route usually had a smuggler in Afghanistan who retained responsibility for every element of their journey.¹³⁹
2. **Fixers**, including drivers of taxis, buses, and trucks, transport refugees and migrants within a country along the route, sometimes from one border to the next. To serve their lucrative client group, some taxi drivers in Belgrade had learned to speak Pashto. Other fixers act as lookouts for police, put new arrivals in contact with smugglers or, where linguistic ties are not shared, as interpreters.
3. **Gatekeepers** are the drivers, guides, and assistants who help people navigate long walks to and across borders (often through forests, across rivers, and over mountains), hold down the barbed wire on fences, and tell migrants what to say to police. Many gatekeepers in Serbia are themselves migrants who have become stuck there, perhaps for lack of money.¹⁴⁰ Reports from 2016 suggested Roma children were being used to guide people across the Serbia-Hungary border because they could not be prosecuted for people smuggling.¹⁴¹ One key informant suggested rural hunters sometimes help identify border crossing points.¹⁴²

135 "Palermo Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime," November 15, 2000. https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsq_no=XVIII-12-b&chapter=18.

136 MMC "uses a broad[er] interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation." Mixed Migration Centre. "MMC's Understanding and Use of The Term 'mixed Migration' and 'Human Smuggling,'" July 2021. https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/terminology_mixed_migration_smuggling MMC-en-fr.pdf.

137 Except where otherwise indicated, all information in this list is drawn from: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime. "Spot Prices Analysing Flows of People, Drugs and Money in the Western Balkans," May 2021. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Spot-Prices-Analyzing-flows-of-people-drugs-and-money-in-the-Western-Balkans-1.pdf>.

138 But not always: several Afghans interviewed for this study said their journeys had been facilitated by Turkish smugglers.

139 Afghan Analysts Network. "Afghan Exodus: The re-emergence of smugglers along the Balkan route," August 10, 2016. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/migration/afghan-exodus-the-re-emergence-of-smugglers-along-the-balkan-route/>.

140 Key informant 15, Belgrade.

141 Afghan Analysts Network. "Afghan Exodus: The re-emergence of smugglers along the Balkan route," August 10, 2016. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/migration/afghan-exodus-the-re-emergence-of-smugglers-along-the-balkan-route/>.

142 Key informant 2, Sarajevo.

4. Working in countries of origin or in reception centres on the route (or even online) on behalf of package-dealers, **prospectors** or **touts** identify prospective clients of smuggling services. While in home countries this may be something of a specialised role, in transit countries migrants themselves—often those staying in reception centres or in established squats—may fill the role to make some money en route to pay for their own journey.¹⁴³ Afghan interviewees, for example, said that they were promised free travel from Türkiye to Greece if they were able to sell the crossing to **'at least 20'** others.
5. **Accommodation providers** include hotels willing to put up migrants without complying with requirements (such as those in Serbia) to register all foreign nationals, and owners of private accommodation near borders.
6. Some **police officers and border guards** are reportedly involved in helping guides and their customers cross frontiers, for example by providing information on when and where to best cross to avoid detection. Such activity has led to a number of arrests of the officers allegedly involved, such as the head of the border post in Zvornik, BiH and a policeman in Tirana, Albania who were charged with people smuggling. According to an asylum lawyer in Albania, driving through the country and across borders with visibly foreign passengers is impossible without police collusion.
7. **Escrow managers** are third parties who hold migrants' fees, releasing funds in tranches only as they complete each segment of the journey. This role is often played by money exchange merchants (sarafi in Farsi/ Dari).

Smugglers operating on the Western Balkan route come from a range of countries, including WB6 states.¹⁴⁴ A key informant in Bulgaria said he knew of Bulgarian, Serbian, North Macedonian, Romanian, and Ukrainian smugglers, some of whom had obtained asylum status, and even a (very) few of whom were women.¹⁴⁵ An Iraqi interviewee said she had travelled with a Syrian guide through Albania. Afghan interviewees spoke of Afghan, Pakistani, and Turkish smugglers. Interviewees suggested it is likely that Afghan coordinators are working closely with Turkish smugglers in Istanbul, and that similar partnerships exist involving other nationalities. A Bangladeshi interviewee described having a Bengali coordinator and, upon his arrival in Istanbul, of dealing with Turkish smugglers who arranged for him to phone his family in Bangladesh to confirm that he had arrived safely so that they could release the next tranche of the payment.

It appears that smuggling networks are well consolidated. Research published in 2020 found that nearly one in five people arrested for people smuggling in the Western Balkans had links to organised crime groups.¹⁴⁶ The same study interviewed convicted smugglers, one of whom said:

"The work and handover of the migrants across the borders were well defined and territorial—each smuggler was in charge of a certain part of the border and the handover of the migrant group to the next "leg" was done at fixed points."

In the 2021 edition of its Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, Europol asserted that half of smuggling groups across the EU were solely involved in smuggling migrants; the other half are also involved in trafficking in persons, drug trafficking, excise fraud, firearms trafficking and money laundering.¹⁴⁷ Several key informants suggested that networks that may have been more ad-hoc a few years ago appear to be consolidated now, a development that correlates with—and is perhaps due to—the increased securitisation of the Hungarian border. Key informants suggested that the incidents of violence at the Serbia-Hungary border were evidence of increased contest over the smuggling routes, though some disputed this.

"The border [crossing point] at Subotica is controlled by the Afghans [meanwhile...] Moroccans are controlling [other points on] the Hungary and Romanian borders. ... You [can also] can find Afghan groups close to Romania but a bit further south..."

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

¹⁴³ Key informant 1, Sarajevo.

¹⁴⁴ Key informant 4, Belgrade.

¹⁴⁵ Key informant 1, Sofia.

¹⁴⁶ UNODC. "Measuring Organised Crime in the Western Balkans," 2020. <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/OC/Measuring-OC-in-WB.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ Europol. "2021 Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment," 2021.

6.2 Contacts, contracts, and fees

Interviewed migrants and refugees arranged their smuggling services in several different ways. Word of mouth was particularly common, either between family and friends in the home country (mentioned by Bangladeshis, Afghans, and Pakistanis), or by talking to friends in transit or destination countries. Only one person, an Iraqi woman who travelled from Baghdad, said she found smuggling services online, via a Facebook ad. Interviewees generally said they had not met ‘coordinator’ smugglers face-to-face at any point. They instead communicated via telephone, via guides, or via family members.

“A smuggler in Afghanistan can take you to Iran or to Türkiye. Then we engaged a different one in Türkiye to continue the journey. For our journey onwards from Belgrade, they’re doing everything in Türkiye.”

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

“[In contrast to others], we found a smuggler each point in the route.”

AFGHAN MAN (TRAVELLING WITH TWO COMPATRIOTS), INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

Smuggling fees vary depend on the service offered. Smuggling deals usually came with some kind of assurance that clients would cross a particular border eventually, even if multiple attempts were required—though some interviewees said that after several pushbacks the smuggler had asked for more money. The so-called ‘guaranteed game’¹⁴⁸ arrangement is supposed to ensure that a border is crossed without trouble at the first attempt. Though it was widely accepted by migrants and key informants that such an option existed, no interviewee was able to provide precise operational details of such arrangements.¹⁴⁹

Some borders were crossed through clandestine means, and at other times with the use of forged documents provided by smugglers. Examples of forged documents mentioned in interviews were fake Turkish IDs that let the bearers travel on public busses across Türkiye, and a fake Germany passport that allowed half the members of a family to fly from Greece to Germany—the other half were caught and travelled overland through Albania instead.

“The money you pay to the smuggler covers as many attempts to enter Serbia as you want.”

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

Payments to smugglers cited by interviewees ranged from over €11,000 for transcontinental journeys from Afghanistan to a European Union country, to as little as €100 for the more straightforward crossing between Serbia and Bulgaria. So-called ‘guaranteed game’ or VIP treatment was usually about three times more expensive, with refugees and migrants reporting quotes of €7,000 from Belgrade to Vienna (rather than the usual €2,000) and €10,000 from Istanbul to Belgrade (rather than the usual €3,000–4,500). One interviewed migrant said that Indian nationals he knew paid upwards of €10,000 to fly to Serbia and move onwards (through Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia) to Austria, a figure corroborated by advertised prices online.

Prices to different Schengen destinations barely vary – it’s easier once within the Schengen zone borders – with the exception of temporary suspensions. For example, French police pushback on the crossing from Ventimiglia to France¹⁵⁰ have made smuggler services somewhat necessary, which has likely driven the prices up.

148 ‘Game’ is a colloquial term commonly used by refugees and migrants on the Western Balkans Route for an attempt at crossing borders. See, for example, Sjekloća, V. (ed) (2021) “[Game People – Irregular Migration and Risks](#)” 2nd Edition. Crisis Response and Policy Centre.

149 Key informant 1, Belgrade.

150 InfoMigrants. “Ventimiglia: Bishop Speaks out against France over Border Closing to Migrants.” InfoMigrants, June 14, 2022. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/41172/ventimiglia-bishop-speaks-out-against-france-over-border-closing-to-migrants>.

Taxi drivers were willing to transport migrants within WB6 countries, for varying fees. For example, Pashto-speaking Serbian taxi drivers could transport migrants from the south to the north of Serbia for €300.¹⁵¹ In BiH, taxis were available from Sarajevo to Bihac for €100.¹⁵² Migrants within Bihac were quoted €13-20 by taxis to take them from the city to nearby government-run reception centre 'Lipa'.

Table 7. Summary of smuggler fees cited by interviewees¹⁵³

Origin	Destination	Indicative Price (EUR)
Afghanistan	Iran	€470
Afghanistan	EU	€11,400
Iraq	Türkiye	€5,700
Syria (north)	Türkiye	€2,000
Pakistan	Serbia	€7,600
Iran	Serbia	€5,700
Türkiye	Greece	€6,500
Türkiye	Serbia	€3,000
Bulgaria	Serbia	€100
Calais	Dover	€3,400

Smugglers' fees tend to vary according to the difficulty of crossing a particular border, as this affects the sophistication of their methods, which may include bribing police and border officials for information or assistance, costs that would naturally be passed on to clients. More secure borders reduce the number of people that can be smuggled per crossing, meaning smugglers must charge more per individual to recoup costs and make a profit.

6.3 Self-arranged travel

Not all interviewed migrants and refugees had engaged smugglers. The less well off, many of whom were Moroccans and Algerians, travelled without a smuggler. After arriving in Türkiye (for Moroccans, this was possible by plane, without a visa), this involved significant amounts of walking, sometimes stowing away in lorries, and sometimes swimming. Algerians interviewed in Sarajevo described crossing some of the 11 bridges that connect Serbia and BiH without being seen, or swimming across the Drina River, which marks the border between the two countries.

Those travelling without smugglers said they relied on GPS applications such as Google Maps for navigation, which made the police practice of confiscating or damaging their smartphones particularly frustrating. They also discussed the route in detail with people travelling with them, and with others who had completed particular legs of the journey.

Algerian and Moroccan interviewees who travelled unassisted said their journeys would have been much easier with a smuggler. One Moroccan said he had tried four times to cross the Türkiye-Bulgaria border without a smuggler before engaging one for a fifth, successful attempt. Another tried the same border 10 times, some with and some without a smuggler, before eventual success. Refugees and migrants crossing without smugglers may face more difficulties than those with smugglers because they are in smaller groups (and so easier to apprehend¹⁵⁴), and have less knowledge of when, where, and how to cross.

¹⁵¹ Key informant 10, Belgrade.

¹⁵² A taxi driver said this is what he charged migrants. However, if he was charging much more than that he may not want to have admitted it. A tourist would pay €150-200 for the same journey or €30 on the bus.

¹⁵³ Notes: Where a range of prices were cited for a given journey, the lower figure is shown. Some prices are extracted from 'package deals'. Not all fees had been paid by interviewees, for example Calais to Dover was a quote from an Afghan interviewee considering his options from Belgrade. Table excludes prices for VIP/'guaranteed game' arrangements. Figures cover a wide time period and are thus not a 'snapshot'. Full data in annex.

¹⁵⁴ Key informants suggested that smugglers moved their clients in groups of 40-50, and that Bulgarian police patrolling in pairs were less likely to challenge large groups. Key informant 1, Sofia..

6.4 Payment means and financing

Interviewed refugees and migrants described three ways in which they paid their smugglers. The requisite funds were raised in various ways, including borrowing from relatives (at home or in the diaspora) or other members of their community; savings from wages (earned at home or in Iran, Türkiye, and Greece);¹⁵⁵ commissions earned selling smuggler services to other refugees and migrants; and selling personal possessions such as boots and clothing.

- **Full pre-payment with escrow.** Afghan, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi interviewees described using *hawala*, an informal money transfer system, to deposit a smuggler's total fee for transcontinental migration with a trusted third party who held the funds in escrow (in Afghanistan, this was the role of the money exchanger, or *sarafi*). Payments were then released to the smuggler at each stage of the journey upon proof of arrival, which took the form of a phone call or video sent via WhatsApp.

"[The smuggler in Istanbul] has a room. Each migrant enters the room alone, then the smuggler calls home to prove [to family in Bangladesh] that they are in Türkiye. Smugglers of other nationalities were paid via hawala to those countries."

BANGLADESHI MIGRANT, INTERVIEWED IN SARAJEVO

- **Debt-financed.** One Afghan described agreeing a fee to travel to Türkiye and then paying half of the money up front to the smuggler. The smuggler agreed that he could pay the other half through earnings once he had arrived in Istanbul. Payments were made via *hawala*.
- **Pay-as-you go.** Several interviewees described making cash payments at particular border crossings. Two Moroccans, for example, flew legally to Türkiye, then sought a smuggler to reach Belgrade but, once there, no longer had any relationship with that smuggler.

Smugglers sometimes assisted people free of charge. One instance mentioned in an interview involved a person who was unwell whom a smuggler agreed to take from Greece to Serbia without payment. And a key informant in Bihac said smugglers sometimes helped poorer migrants cross the BiH-Croatia border.

6.5 Efforts to counter smuggling

Sometimes working in partnership with Frontex and other EU entities, Western Balkan law enforcement agencies have made numerous arrests of people allegedly involved in smuggling migrants. Recent examples include:

- In November 2022, EU and Turkish police arrested 382 people accused of various crimes, including people smuggling.¹⁵⁶
- In 2021, authorities arrested at least 50 facilitators/people smugglers in Albania (34), Montenegro (3), and Serbia (13).¹⁵⁷
- In January 2020, Operation Theseus, involving 3,000 officers from eight nations including Albania, Moldova and Turkey, led to the arrest of 167 migrant smugglers.¹⁵⁸
- In 2019, Frontex and authorities of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia targeted travel through major airports, resulting in the confiscation of 14 falsified documents and 160 genuine documents 'held by imposters'. Six people were arrested.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Key informant 1, Vienna.

¹⁵⁶ Turkish Minute. "European, Turkish Police Arrest 382 People in Balkan Smuggler Swoop." Turkish Minute (blog), November 5, 2022. <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/11/05/police-arrest-382-people-in-balkan-smuggler-swoop/>.

¹⁵⁷ Frontex. "The European Border and Coastguard and the Western Balkans," November 25, 2022. <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/the-european-border-and-coast-guard-and-the-western-balkans.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ Turkish Minute. "European, Turkish Police Arrest 382 People in Balkan Smuggler Swoop." Turkish Minute (blog), November 5, 2022. <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/11/05/police-arrest-382-people-in-balkan-smuggler-swoop/>.

¹⁵⁹ Frontex. "The European Border and Coastguard and the Western Balkans," November 25, 2022. <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/the-european-border-and-coast-guard-and-the-western-balkans.pdf>.

Key informants described police activity in Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina as stop-start, with pressure from the EU, other governments, and the general public, leading to sporadic increases in police activity, before budgetary concerns and other priorities diverted attention and resources elsewhere. Key informants reported that police were especially active in 'rounding up everyone they could identify' in the border areas of Serbia and BiH at the beginning of 2023.¹⁶⁰ The previous autumn, Serbian police had stepped up operations, following the publication of Balkan Insight's investigation into Serbian smuggling actors and growing pressure from Austria.¹⁶¹ After the Netherlands and Austria vetoed Bulgaria's and Romania's applications to join the Schengen zone in December 2022,¹⁶² in part because of concerns about organised crime,¹⁶³ police patrols at the Bulgaria-Turkey border in particular and raids of known squats increased, with refugees and migrants consequently moving in smaller groups.

According to key informants, the investigation and prosecution of crimes related to the smuggling of migrants in the Western Balkans face a range of challenges, including:

1. Criminal justice approaches to smuggling of migrants are complicated by national disparities in smuggling laws, human rights concerns, inter-agency rivalry and mistrust (which can hinder information sharing), and, more broadly, the sheer scale of the issue.
2. Police corruption is a major impediment to effective border control and the apprehension of smugglers. Low salaries, largely thankless and often dangerous working conditions, and entrenched petty corruption, mean it is all but inevitable that some law enforcement officers solicit bribes. The expansion of Frontex may be effective in countering police corruption and violence, though others suggested that Frontex personnel have themselves been complicit.

"The average salary of the border police [in BiH] is €500 per month. It's nothing. People are ready to turn to another side, for €20 or €50 or €100."

KEY INFORMANT 1, SARAJEVO

"[Bribes at a high-level work like this: if you work as an expert in police HQ, it's up to you to decide what equipment will be delivered to the police officers. So you don't provide them with the best equipment [and keep the difference]... Frontex is an anti-corruption measure and [the presence of Frontex personnel] definitely makes violence less likely [although there was a recent] case of beating where Frontex officers just watched."

KEY INFORMANT 1, SOFIA

3. The continued ability for some national groups to reach Serbia or other Western Balkans countries lawfully, and then continue on irregular journeys. Where migrants are recruited with a visage of legitimacy, for example Indian or Vietnamese migrants recruited to work in Serbia, the recruitment agencies tend to be beyond the reach of Serbian authorities.¹⁶⁴ Transnational policing requires time and resources which can be scarce and lower priority than more immediate, local challenges.

"Local people in [Serbia's northern] border areas said they were in danger [and] put pressure on the police to [make it difficult for smugglers by] clear[ing] these places... It lasted about a month then they realised they didn't have the money to keep bussing migrants south."

KEY INFORMANT 10, BELGRADE

¹⁶⁰ Key informant 6, Belgrade.

¹⁶¹ Key informant 1, Belgrade referred to Dragojlo, Sasa. "With Police Connections, Serbian-Syrian Translator Turned People-Smuggler." Balkan Insight (blog), June 22, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/22/with-police-connections-serbian-syrian-translator-turned-people-smuggler/>.

¹⁶² The Sofia Globe. "Vetoed by Netherlands and Austria Bar Bulgaria, Romania from Joining Schengen." The Sofia Globe (blog), December 8, 2022. <https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/12/08/vetoed-by-netherlands-and-austria-bar-bulgaria-romania-from-joining-schengen/>.

¹⁶³ Key informant 1, Sofia.

¹⁶⁴ Key informant 4, Belgrade

4. Weaknesses in the border security architecture. Along most of the Greece-Bulgaria border, there is no metal fence or CCTV, making it somewhat easier to pass than the Türkiye-Bulgaria border, which is fenced. That said, a key informant described major issues with the Bulgaria-Türkiye border fence, saying it was falling into disrepair and the CCTV there didn't work.

"They built a metal fence a few years ago but didn't do it very well. A part of it, is now broken. It doesn't work. Most of the cameras, CCTV at the borders don't work. We rely on manpower."

KEY INFORMANT

5. Overwhelmed or demotivated border police officers. Where physical barriers are lacking and detection equipment is ineffective, border police must rely to a greater degree on their human resources. But many patrols contain just 1-2 people and, as reported from Bulgaria, "if they see 20-30 illegal migrants on the border, they don't try to stop them, they just run away".¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Key informant 1, Sofia.

7. Safety, security, and assistance

Key findings

- On the Western Balkan route, refugees and migrants continue to frequently experience violence, exploitation, abuse and pushbacks by border police, law enforcement officials, and other authorities. According to interviewees, the majority of injuries suffered or witnessed were caused by batons, pepper spray, and dogs deployed by Bulgarian, Romanian, Hungarian and Croatian police.
- The use of violence, injuries, and death at Croatia's Western Balkan borders remained widespread in 2022. Pushbacks also remained systematic and encouraged across the Croatian police, even though a relative reduction has been observed over the year, which may have enabled refugees and migrants to transit more quickly.
- Access to health services, particularly during the harsh winter, and other needs and vulnerabilities linked to long, difficult and often dangerous journeys remain a serious cause of concern for local authorities and first respondents. The situation is occasionally made worse by the high turnover of refugees and migrants, putting new pressures on service providers.

7.1 Violence against refugees and migrants

According to the Border Violence Monitoring Network, it has become 'rare for people on the move [in the Western Balkans] not to experience some type of excessive force during detention and expulsion.'¹⁶⁶ Around a fifth of respondents to an IOM survey of migrants and refugees conducted in 2022 said they had suffered some form of violence, exploitation, or abuse at some point on the Western Balkan route.¹⁶⁷ Investigative reports in 2023 suggested that pushbacks at the BiH-Croatia border were not exceptional, as had been claimed previously, but were systematic across the Croatian police and encouraged.¹⁶⁸

Over the course of 2021, the multi-agency Protecting Rights at Borders (PRAB) initiative collected close to 12,000 reports involving pushbacks by border police, law enforcement officials, or other authorities experienced by migrants and asylum seekers at international borders on the Western Balkans route. Testimonies of pushbacks involve physical abuse, harassment, extortion, destruction of property, theft and denial of access to seeking asylum.¹⁶⁹ The Black Book of Pushbacks documents 25,000 violent pushbacks across the EU in 2021 and 2022, affecting more than 16,000 people on the move. More than half of the cases reportedly involved beating and theft of personal belongings, and more than a quarter involved verbal insults, destruction of personal belongings, detention, and denial of food and water.¹⁷⁰

Interviews with child migrants conducted by Save the Children in 2022 found that the most common perpetrator of violence against them was border police officers.¹⁷¹ Sexual molestation of children was mentioned multiple times by key informants, including in relation to a specific case in BiH where sexualised videos of Pakistani and Afghan boys had been made and sold.¹⁷²

166 Border Violence Monitoring Network. "Black Book of Pushbacks," July 12, 2022. <https://left.eu/issues/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-2022/>.

167 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. "Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022".

168 Lighthouse Reports. "Inside Croatia's Secret WhatsApp Group." Lighthouse Reports (blog), April 2023. <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/inside-croatias-secret-whatsapp-group/>.

169 PRAB. "PRAB Report January to March 2022 When there's a will, there's a way to protection," April 2022. https://pro.drc.ngo/media/oifcps1m/prab-report-january-to-march-2022_final.pdf.

170 BVMN. "Black Book of Pushbacks," 7 December 2022. <https://left.eu/issues/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-2022/>.

171 Save the Children, and University of Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. "'Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm'. Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans.," 2022. https://www.savethechildren.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads_Dokumente/Berichte_Studien/2022/embargoed/save-the-children-summary-wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-report-092022.pdf.

172 Key informant 2, Sarajevo.

Most injuries suffered or witnessed by this study's interviewees were reportedly caused by batons, pepper spray, and dogs deployed by Bulgarian, Romanian, Hungarian and Croatian police.¹⁷³ Violent pushbacks sometime have fatal consequences. In February 2023, the European Court of Human Rights fined Hungary around €40,000 for violating an Afghan man's right to life by forcing him to swim back over the Tisza river, back into Serbia, and failing to properly investigate his death.

"They come back to our centres from 'the game' beaten, sometimes from the police and sometimes from those who organise smugglers."

KEY INFORMANT 4, BELGRADE

"I saw people were getting beaten up...about their heads. And the Hungarian police uses dogs to bite people."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

"Bulgarian police were bad. They took everything, including clothes. I was pushed back five times. Once I attempted to go alone, then four times with smugglers."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN SARAJEVO

"Police in Bulgaria were really bad. They took our phones and pushed us back."

MOROCCAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN SARAJEVO

"Our biggest problems were with the Bulgarian police. They beat us and pushed us back."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN VIENNA

"In Greece we met a patrol... They handcuffed us... took our phones, money and also our clothes ... after four days they sent us to the camp."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

"I spoke to a woman with five children who cried [explaining the problems she faced, from] sexual harassment by men to having access to basic human needs, shelter, food."

KEY INFORMANT 1, VIENNA

"When you ask if they have experienced violence, they would say no. And then when you go through an in-depth interview, you realise they were beaten... sexually molested."

KEY INFORMANT 5, BELGRADE

173 Key informant 10, Belgrade.

7.2 Relative reduction of Croatian violent pushbacks?

In 2022 the use of violence, injuries, and death at Croatia's Western Balkan borders allegedly remained widespread and pushbacks "remained the standard practice and a de facto tool for border management."¹⁷⁴ However, at least in some areas, police appeared to become less violent in 2022, which may have enabled refugees and migrants to transit more quickly. A key informant in Belgrade noted a 'very big reduction in pushbacks from Hungary, Romania and Croatia.'¹⁷⁵ Several key informants noted reduced violence at the BiH-Croatia border. Similarly, the PRAB project reported a reduction in the overall number of pushbacks (Figure 7) and their level of violence, with the proportion of pushed-back interviewees experiencing violence dropping to 6% in January 2023, having hovered around 20-25% for much of the year (Figure 8).¹⁷⁶

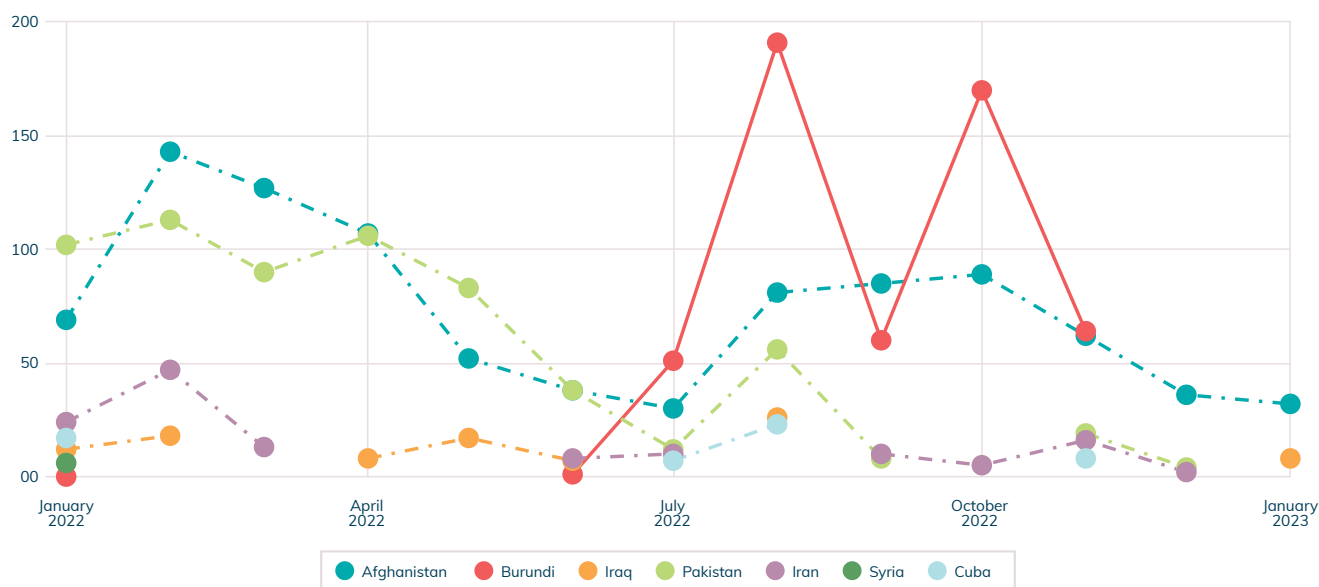
"One interviewee who had been pushed back by Serbian police said that the experience was not violent. An NGO worker in BiH said that they generally viewed the Bosnian police as non-violent.¹⁷⁷ The Serbian police took what one key informant described tongue-in-cheek as a 'humanitarian approach' of allowing migrants to enter and leave Serbia."

KEY INFORMANT 10, BELGRADE

"[We used to have] similar rights violations at the border of Bosnia and Croatia. But in the past year and a half, something has changed [and violence has reduced]."

KEY INFORMANT 1, TRIESTE

Figure 7. Number of recorded pushbacks at the Croatia-BiH border, by country of origin¹⁷⁸



174 DRC. "PRAB January-December 2022," January 2023. <https://pro.drc.ngo/media/cxihgutp/prab-report-january-to-december-2022.pdf>. See also, Human Rights Watch. "Croatia: Ongoing, Violent Border Pushbacks" May 3, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/croatia-ongoing-violent-border-pushbacks>

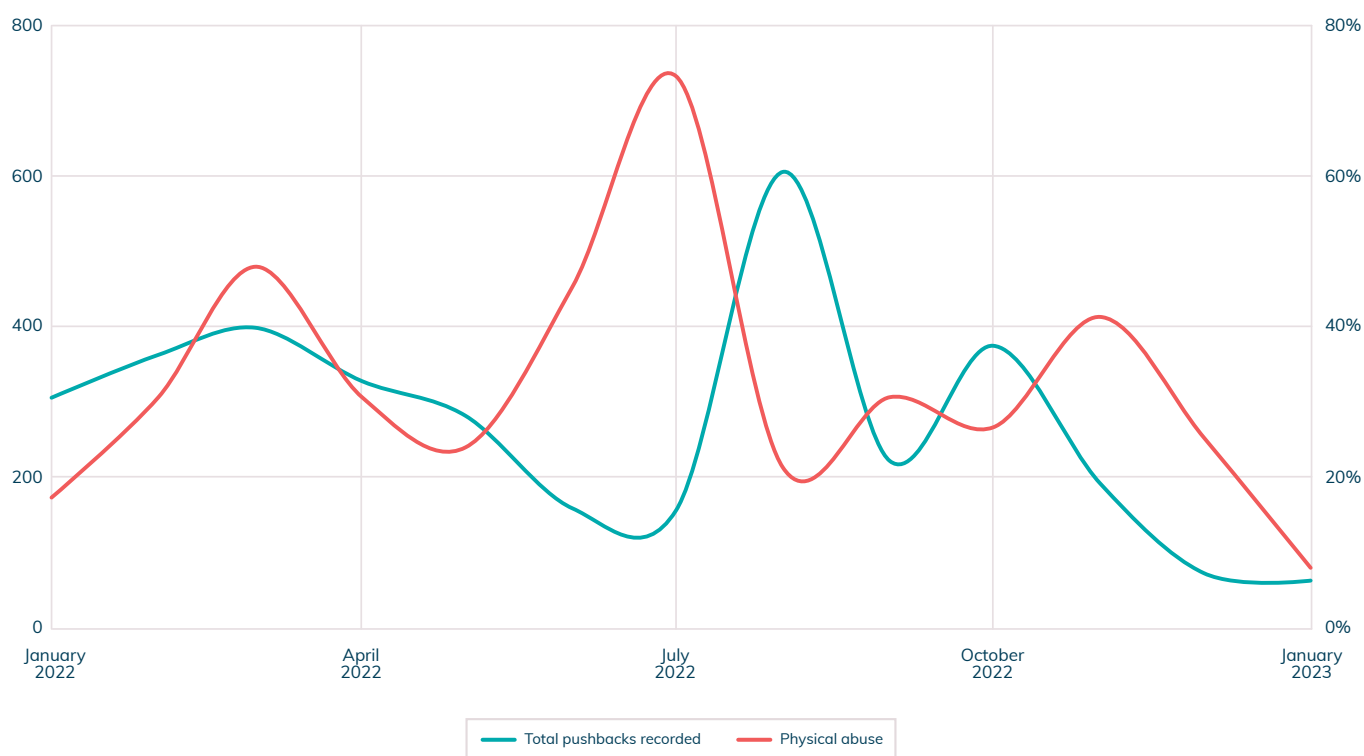
175 Key informant 5, Belgrade.

176 Figures are based on non-representative samples of refugees and migrants pushed back from specific borders. DRC. "PRAB January-December 2022," January 2023. <https://pro.drc.ngo/media/cxihgutp/prab-report-january-to-december-2022.pdf>.

177 Key informant 5, Sarajevo.

178 Figures are drawn from DRC's Border Monitoring Factsheets, available at <https://pro.drc.ngo/resources/documents/border-monitoring-factsheet/>. Note that figures relate to the number of pushbacks, not individuals, and it is common for individuals to experience multiple pushbacks within a month. The data is not representative: while they do indicate the presence of certain nationalities at the border, they cannot be used to infer overall trends.

Figure 8. Number of recorded pushbacks at the BiH-Croatia border and percentage of victim testimonies reporting physical violence



Refugee and migrants, as well as key informants, noted that Serbian and BiH police were less violent than their EU counterparts, even if at various times they stepped up the intensity of their own pushbacks or the targeting of those irregularly present on their respective territories.

"My impression is that [refugees and migrants] are trying to avoid assistance of any kind along the route to pass Serbia very quickly."

KEY INFORMANT 1, BELGRADE

"Two to three years ago, if you travelled around Sofia, you would see 50 or 60 people just walking on the highway... now they are much more careful... following frequent police raids."

KEY INFORMANT 1, SOFIA

7.3 Smuggler violence

Violence perpetrated by smugglers against their clients appear to be rare in the Western Balkans. With business booming, it is generally 'not in their interests to be violent.'¹⁷⁹ Two incidents of groups of migrants or smugglers exchanging gunshots were reported near Serbia's border with Hungary in July and December 2022—possibly stemming from competition between smugglers of different nationalities—¹⁸⁰ but this is hardly indicative of a significant trend of increasing smuggler violence.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Key informant 10, Belgrade.

¹⁸⁰ Key informant 8, Belgrade.

¹⁸¹ See InfoMigrants. "Serbia: One Migrant Killed, Several Injured near Hungary Border." InfoMigrants, July 4, 2022. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/41667/serbia-one-migrant-killed-several-injured-near-hungary-border> and AP News. "Serb Police: Man Shot in Border Town Clash between Migrants." AP NEWS, November 25, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/europe-shootings-hungary-migration-western-269fab3f41a42df0d053e8ed865b49dc>.

There is little evidence that life-endangering behaviour by smugglers in the Western Balkans is taking place at the same scale as it is earlier on the route or on other routes.¹⁸² However, there were some smugglers intercepting those who attempted to cross the BiH-Croatia border themselves¹⁸³ and key informants described them as dangerous and frequently carrying weapons, specifically when accompanying refugees and migrants in border areas and sometimes when confronting police.¹⁸⁴ Several Afghans described aggression from Iranians earlier in the journey.

"For three months I lived in one room on the [Iranian side] of the border of Türkiye and Iran. There was not enough food... the smuggler drank alcohol and beat us."

AFGHAN MAN, INTERVIEWED IN SARAJEVO

Interviewees were generally happy with the integrity of their smugglers, saying they delivered the services that had been agreed. There were some instances of deception: an Iraqi female interviewee and an Afghan male interviewee both described being promised a car that did not turn up, forcing them to walk much further than expected.

7.4 Supportive host communities in BiH and Serbia

Although contact between refugees and migrants and local populations was not the norm, some interviewed refugees and migrants described being met with kindness in Serbia and BiH. Locals supported interviewees with food and clothes, and in some cases to withdraw money. One Iranian interviewee said his knowledge of English had helped him build rapport with locals and police alike.

Research for this study revealed little in the way of violence perpetrated by members of the public although some interviewees and key informants reported an incidents of groups of plain clothed Bosnian-speaking individuals claiming to be the police officers who robbed people attempting to cross to Croatia.¹⁸⁵ An Iranian interviewee said he was attacked by a group of men he presumed to be locals in Montenegro. In 2016, a Serbian hunter shot dead an Afghan national who had crossed the border from the Bulgarian town of Pirot.¹⁸⁶

"We were attacked by men in Montenegro who had knives and wanted to rob us."

IRANIAN MALE, INTERVIEWED IN BELGRADE

7.5 Help from hawala

Many migrants and refugees reported using hawala to send funds home, receive funds from home or other contacts in the diaspora, and pay smugglers (see above). *Hawala* is seen as especially convenient where registration with the formal banking system is difficult or when the money transfers require paperwork that migrants and their families cannot produce. In Afghanistan, it became more of a necessity as the formal banking system ground to a halt after the Taliban took power. Given the frequency with which police stripped migrants caught crossing the border of all of their belongings, and the risks of theft from fellow travellers, hawala also helped those on the move reduce the amount of cash they carried.

However, the system can be expensive, particularly in places where agents are not normally present. A Pakistani interviewee described having to pay €30 in fees on a €100 payment sent from Pakistan to him in Bihac, BiH. As a result, refugees and migrants did sometimes use formal financial systems. Some carry international bank cards that work well in BiH and Serbian ATMs. Western Union and MoneyGram are popular ways to receive money too, with one key informant referring to a study conducted in 2021 that estimated 6m Bosnian marks (€3m) were paid to migrants in BiH in a single year through formal money transfer agencies. Migrants and refugees sometimes overcome their lack

182 Litzkow, Julia, Bram Frouws, and Roberto Forin, "Mixed Migration Briefing Paper," June 2021. https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/181_MMC_Key_Messages_Smuggling_and_Mixed_Migration.pdf.

183

184

185 Key informant 3, Bihac.

186 Deutsche Welle. "Afghan Migrant Shot Dead in Serbia." dw.com, August 24, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-refugee-shot-dead-in-serbia/a-19497602>.

of identification documents by having money sent to them via a local resident, who may take a cut,¹⁸⁷ or may do it for free, as experienced by a Pakistani migrant in BiH.

7.6 Health concerns

Refugees and migrants had often walked for long periods, in the cold, in inadequate clothing. Like the local population, they were susceptible to respiratory illnesses. Scabies is prevalent, due to living in unhygienic conditions (inside and outside of reception centres) in close proximity with others. Some are HIV positive and require (and receive) antiretroviral treatment.¹⁸⁸ For those struggling to leave Serbia and others who may have been exploited earlier in the journey or before departure, psychological illnesses are a challenge, but available treatment is limited. In BiH and Croatia, many unexploded landmines are yet to be cleared; this caused the death of at least one migrant in 2021.¹⁸⁹

"In Sid [on the Serbia-BiH border] they are really struggling because it is full of unaccompanied children trying to get to the border, returning to the centres with injuries and scabies."

KEY INFORMANT

Protection needs differed depending on migrants' experiences, which tended to vary according to nationality. Migrants who had spent months or years travelling, facing multiple episodes of physical hardship and police violence (among them Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Iraqis), were noted by key informants to cope better with the challenges in Serbia and BiH, with the promises of a life in the EU just around the corner. Migrants who had flown into Serbia (Cubans, Burundians, Tunisians) struggled more with the conditions and challenges.¹⁹⁰

7.7 Response challenges

The high turnover of refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans introduces new pressures on service providers. On the one hand, refugees and migrants are no longer becoming stuck in the region for long periods. On the other hand, there are more beneficiaries passing through, in a shorter period of time. They are in need of short-term assistance, from food and water to non-food items such as clothing.¹⁹¹ In addition, with refugees and migrants seeking to avoid the reception centres they perceive might slow them down, and previously well-known squatting locations that are increasingly being targeted by police, greater efforts are needed through outreach exercises to locate those on the move.

This is challenging because funding for the humanitarian response tends to be tied to the length of time refugees and migrants stay. It depends on a count of the number of nights that identifiable beneficiaries stay. In the past, there were fewer beneficiaries in Bosnia & Herzegovina but they stayed for longer. The unit costs (i.e. per day, per person) of shorter-term beneficiaries are higher, so even if the overall number of 'beneficiary nights' are less, there is a higher overall cost of response: supporting one person for five days is much cheaper than five people for one day each.

"Hundreds are coming and going on the same day, so it's an immense amount of work..."

KEY INFORMANT 7, SARAJEVO

187 Key informant 2, Sarajevo.

188 Key informant 8, Belgrade.

189 Tondo, Lorenzo. "Croatia: Landmine from 1990s Balkan Wars Kills Asylum Seeker." The Guardian, March 7, 2021, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/07/croatia-landmine-from-1990s-balkans-war-kills-asylum-seeker>.

190 Key informant 7, Sarajevo.

191 Key informant 1, Sarajevo.

8. Conclusion

In 2022, the Western Balkans saw the highest number of transiting refugees and migrants since 2015/16. The route remained passable with or without a smuggler, even if it was challenging in places, and the ever-shorter stays of refugees and migrants in WB6 countries suggested that entry into EU states to the north was in relative terms quite smooth. Arrivals into the Western Balkans of Syrian and Afghan nationals remained consistently high throughout the year and into 2023. Other national groups appear to switch routes more readily, notably Iraqis who shifted back to the Western Balkan route after entry via Minsk and Eastern Europe became difficult.

Germany appears to be the primary intended destination of Afghans and Syrians transiting the Western Balkans, while Pakistanis and Moroccans on the route often favoured southern European countries. Whether refugees and migrants planned to incur the considerable risks and expense of travelling on from the Schengen zone across the English Channel to the UK depended on their ability to pay, or was related to some reason why 'easier' Schengen destinations were not suitable. For example, some Afghans consider Germany to be 'full', and others deemed support to asylum seekers in France to be poor.

Many of those moving through the Western Balkans in 2022 had, since leaving their countries of origin, spent months or years living in Türkiye. This is why prominent among the factors responsible for increased arrivals in the Western Balkans was the step-up in forcible returns from and the dire economic situation in Türkiye, which both spread anxiety among Afghans and Syrians living there. The situation will likely remain difficult given popular anti-immigration sentiment in the lead-up to the May 2023 elections and the massive internal displacement that followed the February 2023 earthquakes. 2023 will likely also see the continuing effects of the Taliban takeover, with Afghans who initially fled to Pakistan or Iran continuing their journeys, and nationals of those countries joining them.

The rate of arrivals into the Western Balkans may be tempered by the increased securitisation of the Bulgaria-Türkiye and internal WB6 borders and a more restrictive stance by Croatian police. But the continued success of smuggler-assisted crossings of the heavily secured Serbia-Hungary border suggests that smugglers will adapt. Further returns from Western Balkan states may deter some national groups from the route (as appeared to happen with Pakistanis and BiH), but most readmission agreements are too far from being operational to have any major effect in 2023. Visa requirements introduced under EU pressure by Serbia in 2022 have reduced arrivals of Tunisians and Burundians especially, but these accounted for a relatively low proportion of overall arrivals in 2022. Future trends are difficult to predict, but higher numbers during the spring and summer months are likely, with families more confident about the journey, and smugglers bolder in their ability to move large numbers of people and even directly challenge law enforcement.

Key EU member states (Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria) and WB6 partners, especially Serbia, will put increased pressure on border police to reduce these numbers, which will likely mean continued violence at EU borders. The effects of Frontex continuing to expand operations in the WB6 may be double-edged, with the presence of a multinational force subject to the inspections of a fundamental rights officer perhaps tempering both violence and petty frontline corruption.

Yet effective security measures run the risk of resurgent humanitarian challenges. Successfully closing key border crossings may lead to a build-up in refugees and migrants waiting to cross. At this point, the consequences of the downscaling of national and local infrastructure and humanitarian funding—triggered by a reduction in the cumulative duration of transit of people on the move—may become apparent. Few key informants expressed confidence that WB6 authorities will be able to scale up government-led or -funded services quickly enough.

Annexes

Annex 1. Composition of arrivals in 2022

Women

The overwhelming majority of refugees and migrants transiting the Western Balkans in 2022 were men. About 6% of women taking part in IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix surveys in 2022 were women.¹⁹² In December 2022, women made up 9% of people encountered in IOM outreach across the Western Balkans¹⁹³ and 3% of 4,102 people counted in Serbia.¹⁹⁴ This compares to women making up about 10% of irregular entries detected by Frontex in 2021 and 2022 across the EU's external borders.¹⁹⁵

In Bulgaria and Austria, women submitted only 11% of total first-time asylum applications (compared to 22% in Greece and 30% in the EU overall). Taken together, this suggests that men make up a relatively larger proportion of the movements on the Western Balkan route compared to other routes.

Key informants agreed, observing that there were “a few single women from Algeria and Morocco” noted in reception centres during the year but few remained by the start of 2023.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the few families still arriving in the winter months of 2022 tended to be from African and Middle Eastern Countries, namely Burundi,¹⁹⁷ Congo, Syria and Iraq. Apart from Syrians, there were few from those countries remaining at the turn of 2023.

Children

There are a considerable number of minors among refugees and migrants arriving in and transiting the Western Balkans. An accurate figure is difficult to establish because, as with adults, most transiting children are unlikely to encounter the reception system. They may even make extra efforts to avoid it because of knowledge that child protection measures may slow down their journey.

Nevertheless, data exercises in 2022 suggest that children constitute around one in ten transiting the Western Balkans. IOM's January 2023 Western Balkans DTM and January 2023 BiH Situation report found 14% of refugees and migrants present were children.¹⁹⁸ UNICEF noted that as of September 2022, about 5%¹⁹⁹ of refugees and migrants present in Serbia were children, of which 83% were boys. In BiH, about 12%²⁰⁰ were children, with unaccompanied girls on the increase.²⁰¹ On an EU-wide basis, children constituted around 11% of detections of irregular border crossings in 2021.²⁰²

192 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. “Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022,” February 2023. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/WB_Annual_Report.pdf.

193 5% women and 4% girls. IOM. “Western Balkans Mixed Migration Flows Report,” February 2023. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/WB%20Mixed%20Migration%20Flows%20Report%20%20-%20January%202023.pdf>.

194 UNHCR. “Statistical Snapshot,” December 2022. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98349>.

195 The breakdown by route is not publicly available. For 2021, see Annex Table 1. Frontex. “Risk Analysis for 2022/23,” October 7, 2022. https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/ARA_2022_Public_Web.pdf. For 2022, see Frontex. “EU's External Borders in 2022: Number of Irregular Border Crossings Highest since 2016,” January 13, 2023. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-s-external-borders-in-2022-number-of-irregular-border-crossings-highest-since-2016-YsAZ29>

196 Key informant 6, Belgrade.

197 An especially large proportion of women was noted among Burundians in both Belgrade and Bihac. Key informant 3, Bihac, Key informant 2, Belgrade.

198 IOM. “Bosnia and Herzegovina Situation Response Report,” December 1, 2023. https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/01_IOM%20BiH%20External%20Sitrep_8%20JANUARY.pdf. IOM. “Western Balkans Mixed Migration Flows Report,” February 2023. <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/WB%20Mixed%20Migration%20Flows%20Report%20%20-%20January%202023.pdf>.

199 333 of 6,112 counted in September 2023.

200 481 of 4,000 estimated overall in September 2023.

201 UNICEF. “Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe Humanitarian Situation Report No 45, 30 September 2022,” September 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/media/130661/file/Refugee%20and%20Migrant%20Crisis%20in%20Europe%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No%2045%2030%20September%202022.pdf>.

202 Frontex. “Risk Analysis for 2022/23,” October 7, 2022. https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/ARA_2022_Public_Web.pdf.

Afghanistan was the most common nationality with Burundian minors also prominent in both Serbia and BiH.²⁰³ Corroborating this, an IOM survey of refugees and migrants under the age of 18 staying outside of the reception centres found two thirds were Afghans, followed by Burundians.²⁰⁴

Annex 2. Full list of fees paid by interviewees to smugglers

Origin	Destination	Fee	Notes	Nationality
Afghanistan	Germany	\$12,000		Afghan
Afghanistan	Austria	\$12,000		Afghan
Afghanistan	Iran	\$500		Afghan
Baghdad	Istanbul	\$6,000	Clandestine	Iraqi
Baghdad	Istanbul	€6,000		Iraqi
Belgrade	Vienna	€7,000	Guaranteed game	Afghan
Belgrade	Vienna	€2,000	Clandestine via Bosnia	Afghan
Belgrade	Vienna	€3,000		Indian
Belgrade	Paris	€1,500		Afghan
Belgrade	Any EU	€3,500		Pakistani
Belgrade	Sarajevo	€300		Pakistani
Bihac	Croatia	€5,000	By car, direct	KII
Bihac	Croatia	€1,000	Guided walking	KII
Calais	Dover	€3,000		Afghan
Cuba	US	\$15,000	Via Nicaragua	Cuban
Greece	Germany	€5,000	Fake German passport	Iraqi
Greece	Belgrade	€3,000	Clandestine via Albania	Iraqi
Greece	Serbia	€800	Walking	Pakistani
India	Austria	€10,000	Flight to Belgrade	Indian
Iran	Belgrade	\$7,000		Afghan
Iran	Belgrade	\$6,000		Pakistani
Isparta (Turkey)	Lesbos (Greece)	€6,500		Iranian
Istanbul	Belgrade	€4,500	Clandestine via Bulgaria	Syrian
Istanbul	Belgrade	€3,000		KII
Istanbul	Belgrade	€10,000	VIP	KII
Istanbul	Belgrade	€3,000		Afghan
Istanbul	Belgrade	€3,000		Afghan
Oman	Türkiye	€1,233		Bangladeshi
Pakistan	Belgrade	€8,000		Pakistan
Sofia	Belgrade	€200		Moroccan
Sofia	Belgrade	€100		Algerian
Syria (north)	Istanbul	€2,000		Syrian

203 UNICEF. "Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe Humanitarian Situation Report No 45, 30 September 2022".

204 IOM. "Bosnia & Herzegovina — Migrant Presence Outside Temporary Reception Centres, Round 16," November 30, 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/bosnia-herzegovina-%E2%80%94-migrant-presence-outside-temporary-reception-centres-round-16-27>.

Annex 3. Interview guides

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview for this research of the Mixed Migration Centre, which is a research centre part of the NGO Danish Refugee Council. The interview will be about mixed migration trends and dynamics in the Western Balkans and will be used for an MMC publication. You do not have to answer all questions, just the questions for which you have knowledge and experience.

The discussion will last around 30-45 minutes. If you want to stop the interview for any reason just let me know. I will use a transcribing assistant called Otter. The notes will remain private to me and my focal point within MMC only, and I will remove any reference to individual people before sharing it. Your participation is voluntary. You can change any part of the interview if you wish, and you can cancel your participation or use of your interview at any time. Please tell us how you would like to be cited and if you wish to be informed about the results of the research, in which case we will retain your contact details.

Let me give you a brief overview before we start. The first half of the interview will be about migration trends and smuggling dynamics. The second part will focus on protection issues, including conditions en route and access to basic services. I will use the term 'migrant' throughout to refer to all types of migrant, including refugees. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview ID: Date_Country_Number | **Consent level (select one):** 1 - full name, position | 2 - organisation only | 3 - anonymous | 4 - no consent, end interview. | **Would like research copy:** 1 - Yes | 2 - No. **Proof of consent:** 1 - Signed form (this document) | 2 - Email, provide date: __/__/2023 | **If 1, provide signature:**

Interview

Q#	RA	Interview Question	Follow ups/ probes
1	1A. Trends and intentions.	Could you describe migration flows through the Western Balkans currently and key changes over the past 6 months? esp. routes, hubs, and crossing points.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name key hubs and crossing points. Key trend-changing moments. High level numbers (if not published)
2	1A. Trends and intentions.	What factors influence migrant choices in routes and destinations? How do social, demographic, and other characteristics of migrants factor in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differences between women, children, migrants with families. Extent to which smugglers influence choices. Implications of e.g. Schengen, visa changes.
3	1A. Trends and intentions.	Can you tell me specifically about what shapes the destination intentions of each of the following groups: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare other nationalities, demographics. Compare points in time/ policy changes. What misconceptions are there?
4	1C. Smuggling dynamics.	What else can you tell me about how people smugglers operate and/ or how migrants procure travel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and formality of smuggler networks. Identity of smugglers (nationality, gender, base, relevance of Kosovo) Client-smuggler relationship (payment, recruitment, referrals). Links with other forms of organised crime.
5	1B. Conditions and protection.	What challenges do migrants face in staying safe and accessing basic services en route?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women, families travelling with children, unaccompanied minors. Differences between routes (nationality, ability to pay, whether they enter reception centres or not).

6	1D Access to Information	What information do migrants need and how do they access it? What sources are seen as trustworthy? Where are the gaps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differences by nationality/ language, demographics. Probe for topics, themes etc.
7	1B. Conditions and protection.	Which groups are most/ least effectively reached by the services of humanitarian or state-led responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would most improve the situation?
8	2B. Gatekeepers	Which (lesser known/ local) NGOs or community organisations are well connected with migrants en route and might facilitate later engagement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Particular groups they would be good at facilitating introductions to. Any caveats.
9	2A. Data	What data sources or publications are you aware of that might further support the study objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published/ unpublished.
10	Close	Is there anything else you'd like to add, e.g. policy and programmatic responses you'd like to see?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of existing/ pipeline initiatives.

Closing

Thank you for your time today. If you have asked to be sent a copy of the research, we will do so once published, which is estimated to be in March. If you wish to withdraw your consent at any time, please do so before the end of February.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview for this research of the Mixed Migration Centre, which is a research centre part of the NGO Danish Refugee Council. The interview will be about mixed migration trends and dynamics in the Western Balkans and will be used for an MMC publication. You do not have to answer all questions, just the questions for which you have knowledge and experience.

The discussion will last maximum 30 minutes. If you want to stop the interview for any reason just let me know. I will not record the interview but will use an app called Otter which helps me take notes. All identifying information will be removed before I share the notes with my colleagues at MMC.

Your participation is voluntary. You can change any part of the interview if you wish, and you can cancel your participation or use of your interview at any time. Please tell us how you would like to be cited and if you wish to be informed about the results of the research, in which case we will retain your contact details. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview ID: Date_Country_Number | **Verbal consent given?** 1. Yes 2. No

Interview

Q#	RA	Interview Question	Follow ups/ probes
1	1A. Trends and intentions.	Can you tell me about your background? I'm interested in where you're from and how you got here.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Routes, time since departure, places, travel companions. Choices made, i.e. one route over another. Timing of departure, prerequisites (e.g. savings, season). Awareness of media, policy, dangers etc.
2	1A. Trends and intentions	Why did you choose to leave home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reasons for departure, probe beyond basics ('jobs'), people who were influential in the decision. Where did you want to reach and why? Counterfactual: "why not..." legal routes, do x at home.

3	1C. Smuggling dynamics.	I'm interested in understanding how you arranged your travel. Who did you engage with to assist you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to smuggler, how much paid, was smuggler known to them. • Single smuggler/ multiple • Role of internet/ social media • Fees • Other options, did they reject offers?
4	1B. Conditions and protection.	Can you tell me more about your journey so far? I'm interested in any difficulties you faced and how you were treated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food, shelter, medicine. • Treatment by police, other migrants, smugglers, general population.
5	1B. Conditions and protection	Who assisted you along the way? Perhaps they were individuals or organisations. Perhaps they supported you with information, food, shelter...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons why they sought out/ avoided certain types of assistance, e.g. trust or access issues.
6	1A. Trends and intentions.	Where are you going now? Was that always the plan? What would change your plans?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routes, final destination. • Why choose one route over another, e.g. why choose comparatively difficult routes? • Misconceptions about destinations. • Influence of the smuggler over routes, destination. • Knowledge of asylum process at destination/ transit countries. • Perceptions of risk/ likelihood of success. • Compared to "other migrants like you", do you align with views etc. of compatriots?
7	1D Access to Information.	What do you know about [intended destination] and why is it attractive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal framework, conditions, job prospects etc. • Misconceptions, changes in perceptions en route. • Sources of information.
8	Close	Is there anything else you would like to share?	

Closing

Thank you for your time today. You have my contact details and the details of [interpreter] if you wish to ask anything else about the study.

Finally, would you be open to me asking you a follow-up question via WhatsApp or social media in the next couple of weeks? If so, I'll save your number. If not, I'll delete your number now.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org and follow us at @Mixed_Migration

