

# REACH Situation Overview: rapid assessment of the humanitarian impact of new border policies in the Western Balkans, 4 March 2016



**REACH** Informing more effective humanitarian action

## Introduction & Context

Humanitarian needs of migrants in transit in the Western Balkans have become increasingly severe during recent days. Following the implementation of stricter border controls aimed at regulating the flow of migrants, large numbers of people are currently waiting at borders, often for many days, while others are refused entry altogether and face limited options for either onward movement or return. With their limited resources rapidly depleting during delays, large numbers of migrants are becoming increasingly reliant on humanitarian assistance.

Despite stricter controls by Turkish authorities following implementation of the EU/Turkey joint action plan, large numbers of migrants have continued to arrive in Greece, with UNHCR reporting a daily average of 2,510 sea arrivals from Turkey from 19-25 February 2016.<sup>1</sup> On 18 February, the European Council conclusions on migration stated that the migrant flow from Turkey remains too high.<sup>2</sup> Following this statement, upstream countries in the Western Balkans introduced new policies to decrease the number of migrants crossing their borders. With countries along the route adopting similar policies, this resulted in a cascading effect, leaving migrants stranded at borders, unable to advance or move back. As a result, more than 10,000 migrants are stranded in Idomeni, Greece and around 2,000 at the Tabanovtse transit camp in FYROM, with smaller numbers

in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia.<sup>3</sup>

REACH has been collecting primary data to monitor migration throughout the Western Balkans since September 2015, in order to address the information needs of humanitarian stakeholders and decision makers. As European leaders prepare for the EU- Turkey Summit to be held in Brussels on 7 March 2016,<sup>4</sup> this situation overview provides an update on developments in the past days as a result of newly implemented policies.

Findings presented here are drawn from group interviews with migrants in Sid and Belgrade, Serbia, and Gevgelija, FYROM, from 1-3 March, 2016. All information has been triangulated with weekly migration data collected by REACH, as well as secondary sources.

## New border policies in the Western Balkans corridor

Before mid-February, the Western Balkans corridor consisted of two major migrant flows from Turkey towards Europe. The “land route” involved travelling from Turkey to Bulgaria, entering Serbia primarily through Dimitriovgrad, then crossing the country to Sid on the Croatian border before travelling onwards into Europe. The “sea route” entailed travelling across the Aegean Sea towards Greece, passing through Idomeni registration centre, transiting to Gevgelija on the FYROM



**Image 1: More than 10,000 people are currently stranded at Idomeni, Greece (as of 3 March 2016)**

side, then to Tabanovtse and onwards to Presevo, Serbia. Both routes converged at the border with Croatia with migrants journeying onwards to other parts of Europe through Slovenia and Austria.

As a result of recent policy changes, these two routes have been reduced to one. All asylum seekers are now supposed to cross from Idomeni (Greece) to Gevgelija (FYROM), then through Tabanovtse to Presevo (Serbia) and onward to Sid. In addition, a registration system is in place to filter out economic

migrants—now considered to be anyone other than those from Iraq or Syria—as well as those travelling without or with inappropriate documents.

These recent developments have hindered the process, causing delays and congestion along

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Europe's Refugee Emergency Response - Update #24, 19-25 February 2016

<sup>2</sup> European Council Conclusions on migration, 18 February 2016

<sup>3</sup> Wall Street Journal, “New Migrant Crisis Flares in Greece”, 3 March 2016

<sup>4</sup> Ekathemirini, “EU-Turkey migration summit on March 7 in Brussels”, 24 February 2016

the Western Balkans corridor and leaving growing numbers waiting or stranded.

While in December and January, migrants typically passed in only one or two days, data collected by REACH teams in Gevgelija, FYROM, Belgrade and Sid from 1-3 March showed that 52% of interviewed groups had been waiting for one week or more. With increased journey times, humanitarian needs are becoming increasingly severe, while the number of vulnerable individuals waiting at border points continues to increase.

### Which groups can access the corridor?

As a result of developments between 18 February and 3 March (see figure 1), **only Syrians and Iraqis are allowed to pass, and among them, only those meeting additional criteria.**

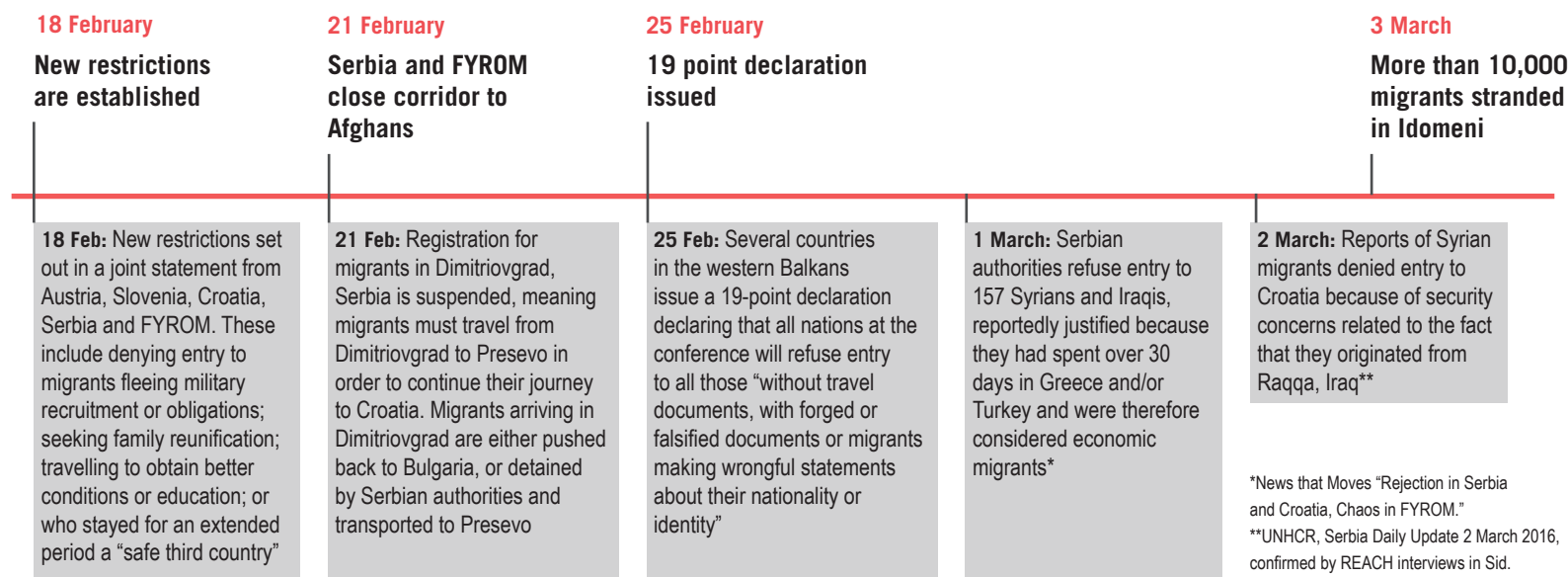
### Humanitarian consequences of the new corridor regulations

#### 1. Slowing migration flow and the 'cascade' effect

With daily arrivals in Greece exceeding 2,500 per day, the interruption of the migration flow due to the new policies has caused major congestion along the route.<sup>6</sup>

Border policies aimed at regulating the flow of migrants to Western European countries are causing a "cascade effect", meaning that wherever the flow accelerates or decelerates in a transit sites along the corridor, this immediately affects all others. As a result, migrant "hotspots" have shifted

**Figure 2: Timeline of changing policies 18 February - 3 March 2016**



from registration centres to transit sites close to the border of the next upstream country, where migrants aggregate while waiting to be allowed passage. In FYROM and Serbia, transit points at Tabanovats and Sid are now hosting growing numbers of migrants, where people are now likely to remain for significantly longer periods than before.

**Currently, Greece hosts nearly 10,000 migrants in Idomeni while nearly 6,000 are waiting elsewhere in the country.<sup>8</sup> Many of these people will likely not gain passage to Europe due to new policies,** while others will have to wait for their turn to become one of the 580 that FYROM allows to pass through

their borders on a daily basis. Furthermore, migrants who are pushed back from further points along the Balkans route face an uncertain fate. Serbia has declared two options for those pushed back to its borders: a) apply for asylum in Serbia, or b) return to the FYROM border.

While countries such as FYROM and Serbia can attempt to manage the migration flow by implementing daily caps and redefining criteria to limit the number of migrants passing through their borders, Greece is unable to control the number of new arrivals. The build-up of over 10,000 people currently waiting at Idomeni is a direct result of border closures and restrictions

further along the route.

**Unless Western Balkans countries extend the numbers of migrants allowed to transit through their territories, Greece will undoubtedly suffer a humanitarian crisis.** Migrants who are considered to be complying with new regulations and registration procedures will still be subject to long delays, depleting their travel resources. The longer the delays the less likely migrants will be able to finance both their continued journey as well as to meet their basic needs without assistance. Those who fall outside of the new regulations will likely seek alternative routes, turning to smuggling networks to reach their

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, Europe's Refugee Emergency Response - Update #24, 19-25 February 2016,

<sup>7</sup> Washington Post, 'Greece: FYROM has closed its borders to Afghan migrants', 21 February 2016

final destination.

## 2. Nationalities excluded from the official Balkans corridor

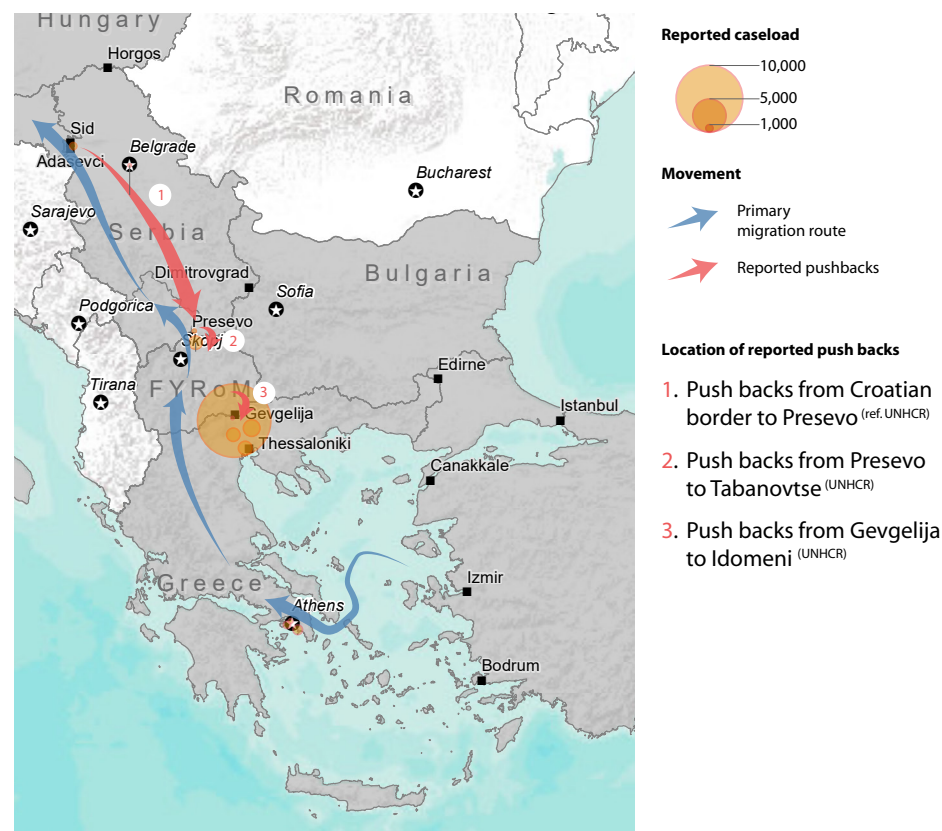
Since January 2016, those travelling from outside Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq have been systematically denied access to the Western Balkans through formal channels. Viewed as 'economic migrants' their recourse has been either to return to their country of origin or seek alternative means to reach their final destination. Groups that choose to do this by-pass registration systems, which not only enable them to legally transit through the Western Balkans corridor but also to gain access to humanitarian assistance provided by authorities, civil societies, UN agencies, and NGOs along the route.

The most notable recent shift in terms of access to official asylum seekers procedures concerns Afghan nationals. New developments along the migration route include push backs and refusal to grant entry to Afghan migrants at border points to enter FYROM, Serbia and Croatia. Since the policy was initiated in late February, this has resulted in two categories of Afghan migrants. First, those who managed to cross into FYROM and Serbia from Greece before the new policy was implemented, but find themselves stranded with no further forward mobility; and second, those who have newly arrived in Greece, unaware of new border policies which prevent them from gaining access to Europe.

According to UNHCR, **41% of migrants who have arrived in Greece in February are not eligible for Balkan transit. Of those not eligible, 73% are Afghans.**<sup>10</sup> Because of the length of time in which Afghans spend in transit before arriving to the Western Balkans, usually one to two months, there is likely to be a **delayed reaction to any new policies affecting Afghans, meaning that the flow of Afghan families and groups of individuals is unlikely to change in the coming weeks.** In addition, most information in Idomeni (and generally speaking throughout the migration route) is not targeted to Afghans, available only in Arabic or English. Afghans, unlike Syrians, are less likely to use the internet and social media to inform their journey and are therefore in more need of information through official/aid channels. Usually more impoverished and less educated than Syrians, stranded Afghans tend to fall out from the aid system, due to lack of awareness and information and have limited to no resources to cope with extended transit delays. In addition, now that Afghans are no longer considered eligible to enter the EU, humanitarian assistance is less available to them.

As a result of the new policies, aid workers in Idomeni report that many young Afghan men are leaving the camp to look for alternative routes and seek out smugglers. By doing so and by failing to register through formal migration channels, these young men essentially fall off the radar. On the one hand, this may mean that it's easier for them to navigate new border restrictions but on the other, it puts them at a

Figure 2: Location of migrants waiting at borders and reported push-backs



heightened risk for trafficking and exploitation.

## 3. Fallout from the corridor among Syrians and Iraqis

Afghans are not the only ones at risk of "fallout" from the corridor. New policies also impact Syrian and Iraqi migrants, who can be denied onward movement if they fall into the following categories:

- **The authenticity of statements and documents are called into question.** There were many reports of migrants travelling on documents suspected of being forged, who were pushed back to the previous border. Migrants in Gevgelija reported that they were denied entry because their registration papers were signed with a black pen instead of blue. Issues have also been reported related to the translation

8 UNHCR, 'Winter Operations Cell; Daily Report, 3 March 2016 12:58 PM'

9 Independent, 'Refugee crisis: Greece 'bans refugees from buying tickets' on public ferries from Aegean islands to mainland' 3 March 2016

10 ACAPS, 'Refugee/Migrant Crisis in Europe Situation Analysis – March 2016; citing UNHCR data from 26 February 2016

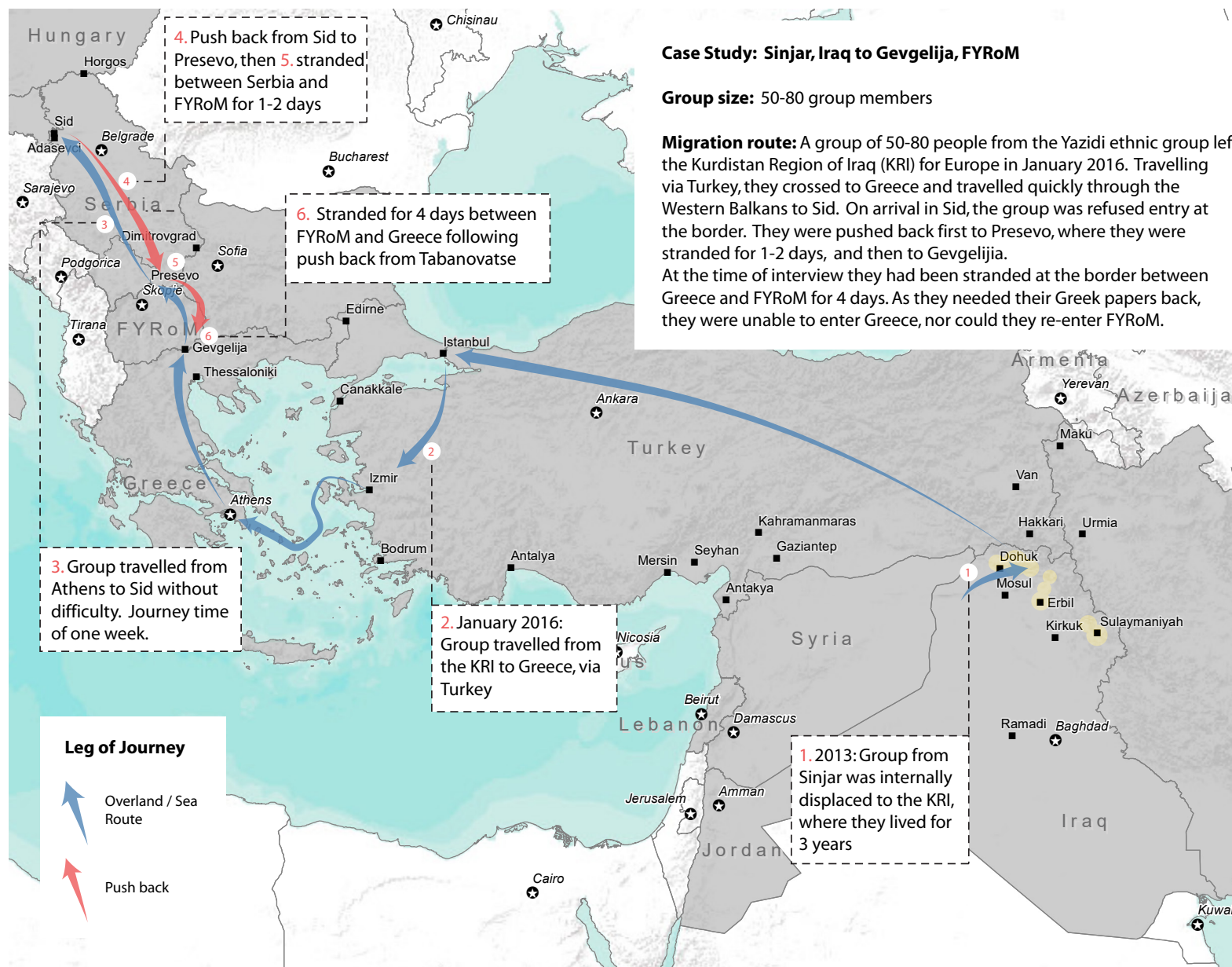


Figure 3: Case study of migrants from Sinjar, Iraq

of names, since Arabic names are often written using different combinations of Latin characters and do not always match, depending on the translation.

- **The reason provided for leaving was not considered valid.** For example, while fleeing war is a valid reason for admission; family reunification, studying, improving living conditions, avoiding recruitment, military obligations and personal disputes are not.
- **Migrants are denied entry because of residence in a safe third country.** One Syrian family interviewed in Sid on 2 March was pushed back by Croatian authorities because the husband had received a Turkish stamp in his passport. The stamp was acquired two years ago when the man travelled to Turkey to seek medical attention for his ailing mother. He then returned to Syria. Now fleeing active armed conflict, he is unable to gain access to Croatia because of his previous travel to Turkey. He and his family continue to try to board the trains to Croatia, but have been refused entry four times.
- **Migrants come from an area considered to be 'safe' within the country of origin.** On 17 February, REACH assessment teams conducted an interview with an Iraqi woman travelling with her three children. She had been pushed back from the Croatian border because authorities said she came from Baghdad which authorities considered to be a "safe" area.

- **Migrants come from an area deemed to be a security concern by the receiving authorities.** On 2 March, UNHCR reported that groups travelling from Raqqa, Syria were turned away by Croatian authorities for transit through their territory. The decision was reportedly taken because of perceived security risks related to their area of origin.<sup>11</sup>

**Interpretation of all the policies above is inconsistent and unpredictable.** This provides a major threat to the smooth flow of regular asylum seekers along the Western Balkans corridor. Moreover, it has a direct impact on the humanitarian situation of the migrants.

These changes imply that migrants, whatever nationality and vulnerable situation, can become stranded at any point along the corridor. Many who are denied entry try multiple times to cross the borders, some are successful while others are not. As access to border crossing becomes increasingly more unpredictable, it undermines the migrants' motivation to ensure that their documentation is in order and to assert their rights. Observations from the assessment conclude that families tend to remain in transit locations, attempting to cross multiple times when denied entry. Whereas, many young men claim that they will

**“ Every day it's a different thing ”**

—aid worker in Tabanovtse, FYROM, commenting on the changing border policies

seek alternatives if they have to wait more than one week at a given border point. That has a consequence as the further migrants advance along the corridor, but find themselves stranded in the route, the more they exhaust their financial means to access basic needs or to move elsewhere. This is particularly true for families with children who are more in need of expensive products such as milk formula, diapers or medicines. In Idomeni, there are long queues at the Western Union shops as migrants access further funds from abroad. However, in other transit locations, there is limited availability to access cash. This is not only a threat to accessing basic needs but also for exploitation, trafficking, and psychosocial trauma.

Reports of push backs from as far north as Slovenia have occurred with migrants retrenching all the way to the Greek border. The danger migrants experience with push backs is that the downstream country may refuse to accept them back resulting in a state of limbo. As is the case for Iraqis stranded between the border between Greece and FYROM (see above case study).

## Conclusion

What was once a relatively fast transit route for migrants to the EU is increasingly suffering from delays and congestion. Thousands are now stranded at various points along the migration route through the Western Balkans. FYROM's cap of 580 migrants per day in comparison to the arrival over 2,500 to Greece has led to serious congestion and bottlenecks. This

leaves Greece to cope with the vast majority of the migrants and a potential humanitarian crisis.

**The new ever changing criteria is having an impact not only on the number and profile of migrants allowed to access the formal migration route, but also on the number of migrants seeking informal and alternative routes to Europe,** who are more vulnerable to protection risks. It will also directly affect the level and type of humanitarian needs, with few transit sites currently equipped to respond to extended stays of over a week, whose facilities will quickly become overburdened. These constant changes to entry criteria have led to a high degree of unpredictability, which makes it hard for aid actors to plan an adequate humanitarian response to meet the needs of migrants.

With authorities and aid actors already struggling to meet the needs of those stranded, it is vital that better strategies are found to manage and share the pressure. In addition, the coming spring, which traditionally brings higher numbers of migrants crossing the seas is likely to result in an increased caseload of migrants.

In order to reduce the current strain and avoid a rapid escalation of the humanitarian crisis, states at the upcoming EU-Turkey Summit should coordinate policy in order to reduce the unpredictability of the situation, harmonize eligibility criteria, and ensure that appropriate humanitarian support is provided to migrants, who will suffer the consequences wherever

they reside.

REACH will continue to monitor the situation in the Western Balkans, focusing on border push backs, emerging migration routes and developing trends, providing periodic updates on the developing situation, in addition to bi-weekly and monthly situation overviews.

### About REACH Initiative

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

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR Serbia Daily Update 2 March 2016

