

The European Migrant Crisis

Situation Overview: Harmica, Bregana, Croatia & Slovenia

19-21 September 2015

REACH Informing
more effective
humanitarian action

SITUATION OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The past week saw a rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers travelling through the Balkans to the rest of Europe. As of 22nd September, UNHCR estimated that in 2015, Europe has seen 477,906 Mediterranean sea arrivals, far exceeding figures for the whole of 2014. Among these, Greece alone has seen 347,474 arrivals, with the number increasing daily. Once in Greece, asylum seekers travel upwards through the Balkans, many with the hope of reaching destinations such as Germany and Sweden. However, with the daily change in country border controls and the increasing number of arrivals, displacement routes are changing at an unprecedented rate.

On September 15th, REACH sent two teams to Greece and the Balkans to collect primary data to understand the current displacement routes used by Syrian asylum seekers, as well as the motivating factors both for leaving their country of origin and choosing their target destination. The information will complement an overall social media review as

well as findings from similar ongoing assessments by REACH teams in the Balkans and the Middle East.

This report outlines the findings from an assessment conducted at several locations along the Croatia-Slovenia border.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Following the sudden closure of the border between Hungary and Serbia in early September, a backlog was created in Croatia as the primary route through Hungary became inaccessible. This caused asylum seekers to disperse in many alternative directions and as of 18th September, more than 11,000 asylum seekers are estimated to have crossed the border from Serbia into Croatia through different means including through fields on either side of the official Sid-Tovarnik road-crossing. From Sid, people reported heading towards the border with Slovenia and then on to Austria and Germany.

A small portion of those who had crossed into

Croatia made their way to Slovenia. Hundreds accumulated at the border, while Slovenian authorities transported people via buses to various reception centres, allowing limited numbers in at a time. From here, they continued onwards to the Austrian border.

With gaps in the information available to them, many asylum seekers sought to walk long distances to avoid official border crossings. Their main concerns



Picture 1: People gather at the Slovenian border

were that they would not be allowed access to the country through the official crossing and secondly that they would be registered as an asylum seeker in Slovenia and therefore become tied to the country for their pending refugee status. There is conflicting information on whether Slovenia is registering asylum seekers or not, though generally this does not seem to be the case.

As a result of the chaotic situation, incidents of missing children and split families have been reported. Furthermore, aid agencies are finding it increasingly difficult to effectively locate and support the people in need.

DISPLACEMENT AREAS OF ORIGIN

Iraqis represented the large majority of those at the Harmica border crossing and Afghans represented the large majority of those at the Bregana border crossing. Syrians made up a minor proportion of asylum seekers found in these areas. For Syrians, the predominant areas of origin were (in order of prevalence) Raaqa, Damascus, and Aleppo.

A surprising majority of Syrians were said to have travelled from government controlled areas. Many reported to have sold their houses to finance their journey. Syrians also mentioned fearing recruitment

into the army as an additional reason for leaving.

Growing tensions were reported between the groups of people of different nationalities, due to rumours that Iraqis and other groups have been forging Syrian documents, while others feared that Europe's welcome extended only to Syrians. There was nothing in the study to suggest other nationalities (usually Iraqis and Afghans) were of lesser need than the Syrians interviewed and individuals from all these groups reported similar reasons for leaving their homes: conflict, instability and a lack of access to basic services.

Many of the asylum seekers from Syria had stayed in their own accommodation or rented accommodation before leaving. A significant proportion of those included in the study had tried to live in Turkey before entering Europe, but could not find work or afford basic housing and services. The study had not encountered any Syrians that had previously lived in camps in Turkey or Syria. At the time of assessment, the trip had reportedly cost on average 2500-5000 Euros per person. This does not include those who reportedly took the more expensive route via Bulgaria.

REASONS FOR DEPARTING TO THE EU

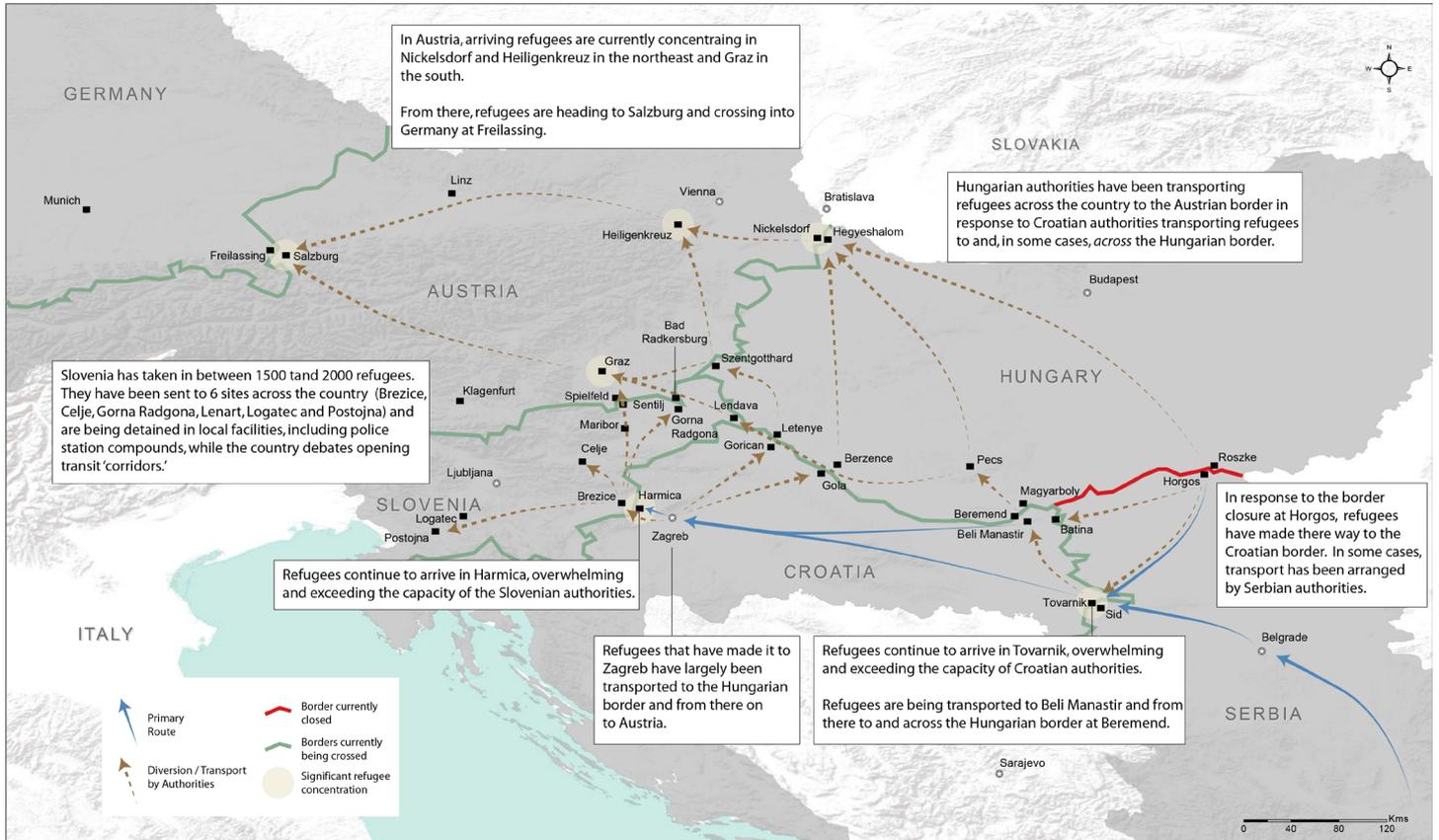
For those who had been displaced directly from Syria,

all respondents reported conflict as the main reason for leaving. A professor of international relations, also on the journey from Syria to Europe summarised the reasons for leaving as follows: "the individual reasons are all distinct and difficult to untangle from each other; we left because of everything, and they are all attributable to the war."

Among the various reasons given for displacement were: the death of a husband; the need for surgery because of a war related injury; difficulties in finding housing because of involvement or suspicion of involvement in previously governing forces; enforced recruitment to armed forces, as well as the destruction of homes and lack of services.



Picture 2: The number of people increase at the border



Map 1: Current Migration routes in the Balkans

Displacement profile in Harmica and Bregana as of 21 September

As of 21 September hundreds of asylum seekers were stuck at the border crossing between Croatia and Slovenia, after Croatia had decided to let them pass through the country to get to Western Europe.

Asylum seekers in the towns of Bregana and Harmica were predominantly young males. They explained that they had travelled ahead of other family members to ensure that the journey was safe, and on arrival they planned to generate funds to bring their families across. Families travelling together made up the next most common demographic group, among them small numbers of vulnerable individuals including unaccompanied minors and people with disabilities.

Those interviewed were generally well educated and had reportedly held mid-level employment in Syria prior to the conflict. Individuals with fewer resources and limited access to savings were reportedly unable to afford the high cost of travel to this location.

Many respondents had been initially displaced within Syria or in neighbouring countries, but after a time of unemployment, reduced legal and employment status, and growing (non-violent) hostility from local populations in neighbouring host countries, they began looking for other options.

Once a significant number had moved to Europe more people were incentivised to move and follow their families. Reunification with family was given as the most common motivating factor for choosing their final destination within Europe.

The reduced price and simplification of the process of getting from Greece to Germany was the greatest factor for leaving to Europe at this time. Germany's welcoming statement was another motivating factor, as well as the seasonal factor in that sea crossings will be much more difficult once winter arrives.

Social media has played a pivotal role in the increase in arrivals as a few Facebook groups and accounts went viral showing the exact process to cross through Europe without the use of unaffordable smugglers. The overall cost has reportedly reduced from €7000-€8000 to around €2000-4000 per person. While the cost of travel from Turkey to Greece was not reported to have vastly reduced, the perceived ability to do so without being arrested has improved.

Overall, this snowball effect of many people leaving

and reporting back to those friends and families left behind has provided great encouragement for Syrians to follow.

MIGRATION ROUTES

INTENTIONS & DESTINATION

Nearly all of those interviewed reported that Germany was their preferred final destination choice where their friends and family were already waiting. Most asylum seekers wished to join family who lived in final destination countries. Legal frameworks for refugee status (including time taken to obtain this status) were never mentioned as reasons for choosing the final destination.

All those interviewed were unclear on the details of their next steps due to the current changes in border crossing arrangements with Hungary. In this context, the lack of information created significant frustration among the asylum seekers.

AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Due to the rapidly changing situation, a general lack of information and the presence of widespread and conflicting rumours, many asylum seekers are confused as to what they should do next. This has led many to walk long distances, across illegal crossings to avoid blocked entry points and being

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Syrian university professor

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As asylum seekers continue to move through Europe, authorities should make preparations for new arrivals. The provision of support, information and assistance in places where displaced people are likely to congregate would help to avoid chaotic scenes sometimes observed so far. This would encourage the use of safe, legal routes and discourage crossings through dangerous areas where asylum seekers take further personal risks.

fingerprinted, so as not to be tied to Croatia or Slovenia for their asylum application.

Those travelling to Europe are heavily reliant on word of mouth and social media as sources of information. Some of the unofficial media and information available (sometimes through smugglers) has heavy implications on the asylum seekers. During interviews, asylum seekers often requested information on border closures and openings, available routes, modes of transportation, and how to find aid.

Consistent and clear official information about the current situation should be provided to asylum seekers at all gathering points. Such measures would help to increase trust in authorities and facilitate the provision of support. This would also allow for groups to stay together and help to avoid incidents of family separation.

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT, its sister-organisation ACTED, and the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT).

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions. For more information, you can write to geneva@reach-initiative.org. Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info