

# The European Migrant Crisis Situation Overview: Tovarnik, Croatia

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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. UNHCR estimates that as of 14 September, Europe has seen 411,567 Mediterranean sea arrivals, far exceeding figures for the whole of 2014. Greece alone has seen 288,020 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 refugees, 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 ongoing social media review and findings from ongoing assessments by REACH teams in the Balkans and Middle East.

This report outlines the findings from an assessment

conducted at the Hungarian-Serbian border. Data was collected through Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews with asylum seekers. Due to the transient nature of the groups, the limited time spent together, and the complex and disparate nature of motivations and intentions, there are limitations on generalizing these issues. The assessed sample is not statistically representative of all those arriving, but interviews were consistent enough for trends to be perceived.

### CURRENT CONTEXT

On 15 September, large numbers of asylum seekers accumulated in Horgos, Serbia, unable to travel further due to the closure of the Hungarian border. As a result, other newcomers gathered in Belgrade, awaiting news from those further down the new proposed route to Austria, via Croatia and Slovenia.

On 17 September, thousands asylum seekers crossed the Croatian-Serbian border between Sid and Tovarnik: some by foot, some transported from Horgos, and others coming directly from Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria and Belgrade. While asylum seekers had understood that this crossing would be open, all official

crossings into Croatia except for the main highway from Batrovci in Serbia, were in fact closed.

Instead, more than 5,000 asylum seekers are estimated to have crossed the border through the fields on either side of the official Sid-Tovarnik road-crossing, despite widespread rumours about the presence of land mines. From here, their aim is to head towards the border with Slovenia.

Once in Tovarnik, local authorities attempted to house more than 5,000 asylum seekers in Tovarnik



**Asylum seekers boarding the train at Tovarnik just after midnight**

station with the intention of transporting them onwards to centres where more services could be provided. However, authorities were overwhelmed by the large number of arrivals, which was far greater than expected.

At around 1am on 28 September, one train and several buses began to transport the asylum seekers to destinations that were unknown to them. Due to the lack of information, some asylum seekers refused to take the available transport. However, most rushed to board the trains and buses, resulting in scenes of panic and distress.

Early in the morning of September 18th, around 6,000 asylum seekers were taken to the Beli Manastir reception centre near the Hungarian border. By the afternoon, around 5,000 them had already left, scattering in all directions when they realized they had not been taken to the Slovenian border as they had hoped.

In the afternoon, tensions escalated in the reception centre as rumours spread about not being allowed entry into Slovenia and about being sent to detention centres in Hungary.

At the same time, asylum seekers were continuing to arrive in Tovarnik, with small numbers understood to have successfully entered Slovenia through unofficial routes. The lack of information provided and growing mistrust of local authorities has led thousands of

asylum seekers to scatter in all directions, walking along the Croatian-Hungarian border and in other directions towards Zagreb and other border towns.

The disorganized nature of the entire process has led to reported incidents of missing children and split families. Furthermore, aid agencies are finding it difficult to effectively locate and support the people in need.

## DISPLACEMENT AREAS OF ORIGIN

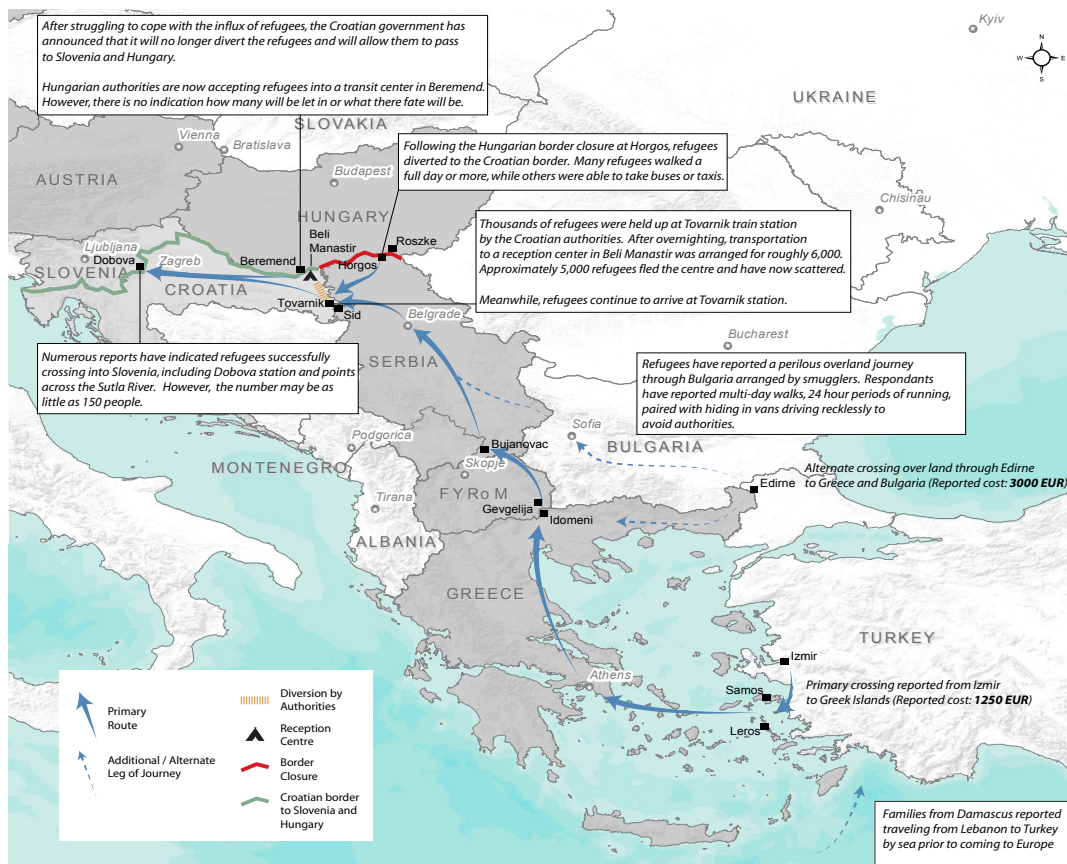
Syrians made up the majority of those in Tovarnik, accounting for approximately 60% of arrivals. Others reportedly originated from Iraq and Afghanistan, with small numbers from elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa. Growing tensions were reported between the groups due to reports of people of other nationalities obtaining Syrian documents. However, regardless of origin or ethnicity, individuals from all these groups reported similar reasons for leaving their homes: conflict, instability and a lack of access to basic services.

Many travel groups appeared to be formed based on country and sometimes location of origin (ie. Syrian Kurds travelling with Syrian Kurds). The largest group from Syria was from Aleppo City and surrounding areas. The second most prominent areas of origin included Damascus, and areas heavily affected

by conflict such as Deir Ez Zor, South Idleb, and Daraa. Most Syrian asylum seekers reported having been displaced several times prior to their arrival in Europe. Many had stayed with host families in lower conflict areas of Syria before leaving the country altogether. Around 40% of those included in this study had spent time in Turkey. At the beginning of their journeys most asylum seekers took the cheaper and less policed route via Izmir to the Greek islands rather than the safer over land route through Istanbul and Bulgaria, reportedly triple the cost. Current routes and barriers are explained in more detail in



People waiting at Tovarnik train station



## Displacement Profile in Tovarnik as of 18 September

Almost 7,000 asylum seekers are estimated to have entered Croatia in a 24 hour period. By early morning on September 18th, many had already moved on, with others remaining stranded in the border town of Tovarnik, sleeping outside in the open or in donated tents.

Those still in Tovarnik on September 18th were predominantly young and male. 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.

map 1 on the following page.

## REASONS FOR DEPARTING TO THE EU

For those who have been displaced directly from Syria, all respondents reported conflict as their main reason for leaving. Also commonly reported was a lack of access to basic services, particularly water. For those who had spent more than three months in Turkey, a lack of employment opportunities, unclear legal status and increasing restrictions were also reported among the main reasons for leaving.

When asked about their reasons for coming to Europe, all respondents mentioned safety and security, followed by the provision of services. Many chose Europe because of the welcoming announcements made by Germany. However, there was a sense of confusion as to why they were now experiencing difficulties getting to Germany.

Another explanation given was that opportunities to travel to Europe had become increasingly available. The cost of transport to Europe was reported to have greatly decreased, and the crossing itself was perceived to be easier. Previously, respondents reported that smugglers were needed to pass through the Balkans, but that for the past five months, this is no longer the case. As a result, 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 be vastly reduced, the perceived ability to do so without being arrested had increased.

Overall the snowball effect of many people leaving and reporting back to those friends and families left behind has provided great encouragement to Syrians to follow.

## MIGRATION ROUTES INTENTIONS & DESTINATION

Nearly all of those interviewed reported that Germany was their final destination. A significant number did not know where they would end up, and often asked for advice on which destination to choose. For those without close family already in Europe, many intended to stay together with members of their newly formed travel groups.

Most asylum seekers wished to join family who lived in final destination countries. Legal frameworks for refugee status (including time-periods to obtain this status) were never mentioned as reasons for choosing

All those interviewed were unclear on the details of their next steps. Suspicion of local authorities was growing and the latest news of transport to Hungary

was received with mixed feelings, as people had heard news of arrests of asylum seekers there.

During the clashes with Hungarian police on 16 September there were also rumours of violence, which had created further suspicion. This has led large proportions of asylum seekers to continue onwards towards Slovenia, despite news of border closures.

## AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Due to the rapidly changing situation, a general lack of information and the presence of widespread, conflicting rumours, many asylum seekers are left confused as to what they should do.

Smugglers were reported to have provided information about where and how to seek asylum in different European countries, but in many cases such information has been incorrect or outdated. With the current lack of official statements concerning a safe passage through the Balkans, asylum seekers are heavily reliant on social media, rumors from fellow travelers and on the information obtained from their families already in Europe about their own journey. Given the constantly changing nature of the situation, this information is also often outdated and of little practical use. Word of mouth was reportedly the primary means of communication, with many asylum seekers reporting limited access to phones

and internet.

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.

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 the chaotic scenes observed so far. This would encourage the use of safe, legal routes and disincentivise crossings through dangerous areas where asylum seekers take further personal risks.

### 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](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org). Visit [www.reach-initiative.org](http://www.reach-initiative.org) and follow us @REACH\_info