

# The Balkan Migrant Crisis

## AN INTRODUCTION



### OVERVIEW

Since the number of arrivals of asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants<sup>1</sup> to Europe significantly increased in March 2015, several key developments have characterised the crisis and the response to existing needs. This note provides an overview of these events and current context by country. The note is aimed at humanitarian responders who recently started or are planning to start working on the migrant crisis in the Balkans.

**The response to the crisis has evolved since spring 2015, from a solely reactive approach, through a surge in support, to measures aimed at restricting the flow.**

The crisis has had three main phases:

- + Between March and August 2015 transit countries slowly adapt to the unexpected and significant increase in arrivals with ad-hoc reactive policies. In June, for instance, Hungary announces plans to build a fence on its border with Serbia. Coordination between affected countries is very limited and there is an overall lack of support from external actors.
- + In August, the extent to which countries are overwhelmed becomes apparent – FYRo Macedonia declares a state of emergency and the Greek Prime Minister requests additional EU aid. Chancellor Merkel announces the opening of Germany's borders to those arriving and international support gears up. EU civil protection mechanisms are launched in September and October for four countries along the Balkan route and UNHCR launches a dedicated appeal for funds.
- + The crisis takes a different turn in the autumn, with Hungary closing its border mid-October, shifting migrant flows within Croatia, and turning Slovenia into a main transit country. FYRo Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia introduce selective entry conditions on 18 November 2015 and currently only people from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are allowed to pass beyond Greece. The EU Commission puts in place additional measures to manage its external border. An agreement between EU and Turkey on 29 November to reduce movement from Turkey's shores has until now had limited impact.

### GREECE

#### Key points

- + Increasing numbers of migrants are stuck on Greece's mainland, mainly in Athens, where service provision is inadequate. The humanitarian response in Greece is only now beginning to focus more on the potential long-term needs of this population, starting with EU-supported accommodation assistance, planned for 30,000 people.
- + Service provision to migrants on the islands is mostly adequate since October 2015, though protection assistance, particularly for unaccompanied minors (who are detained by authorities for up to two weeks in Kare Tepe camp on Lesbos), is limited by the lack of standard procedures for identification.
- + The geographically vast and fast-changing context has resulted in uneven distribution of service provision in Greece. This ranges from Kos, where humanitarian access is limited due to restrictions imposed by the local government, to Lesbos, where media and local authorities have questioned the need for over 50 organisations, and where high reliance on service provision by volunteer groups is not sustainable.
- + Humanitarian organisations list poor communication and frequent policy changes by local and national authorities as a major obstacle to effective interventions. Aid agencies receive practically no information from Turkish departure areas, making it difficult to prepare to assist new arrivals. Due to the restrictive entry procedures, growing numbers of migrants are unable to continue their journeys legally into Western Europe via FYRo Macedonia. This will increase needs in Athens and possibly lead to greater use of alternative routes. (Continued on page 4)



**About this report:** This report is a publication of the Balkan Migrant Crisis Analysis Project, an initiative of ACAPS and MapAction. The findings are based on a review of secondary data and discussions with key informants from (I)NGOs, UN agencies and Governments. All information products can be found [here](#).

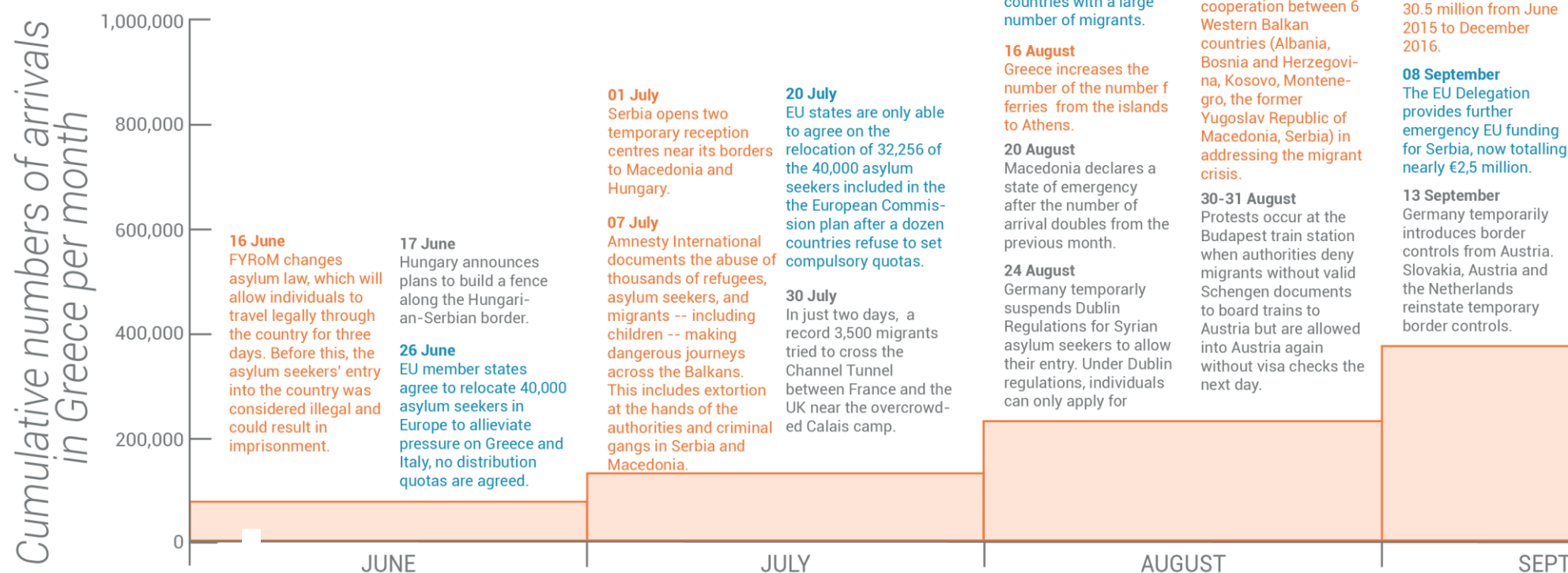
<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report, the term 'migrant' is used to refer to all those transiting to Europe, including refugees, asylum seekers and other groups.

# Crisis timeline 2015

Border Status

EU Decisions

Other Key Events



# Border Status

## EU Decisions

## Other Key Events

### 14 September

EU agrees on the list of safe countries of origin proposed by the EC. The EC also agrees to relocate 160,000 refugees across EU member states. Slovakia and Czech Republic oppose the deal. Details for relocation are yet to be worked out.

### 16 September

The construction of a 175 km fence along Hungary's border with Serbia is completed, the migration route shifts to Croatia.

### 19 September

New arrivals begin from Croatia into Slovenia, Slovenia initially tries to block the flow.

### 30 September

UNHCR launches supplementary appeal for the Special Mediterranean Initiative.

### 05 October

President Erdogan meets with EU leaders to discuss a plan which includes the establishment of six additional refugee camps in Turkey.

### 09 October

First "hotspot" opens in Lampedusa, Italy.

### 15 October

EU and Turkey agree a joint action plan to stem migration flows to the EU. Details still under discussion.

### 16 October

Hungary closes its borders with Croatia to migrants and asylum seekers, leaving only two official border crossings open with

Croatia, forcing people to move on to Slovenia or stay in Croatia.

### 16 October

The first Greek "hotspot" centre opens on Lesbos.

### 18-21 October

Slovenia announces to restrict its intake to 2,500 arrivals a day and calls in army to help patrol its border to Croatia.

### 23 October

The Swedish government agrees upon a stricter asylum law.

### 25 October

EU announces 17-point action plan to improve cooperation regarding the asylum seeker influx.

### 02-06 November

Ferry strike in Greece, puts additional pressure on already overstretched reception capacities on all islands.

### 03 November

First arrivals to a new reception centre Slavonski Brod in Croatia on border with Serbia.

### 03 November

Introduction of a free train services from Serbia to Croatia greatly reduces travel time.

### 04 November

First refugees relocated under the EC plan - Greece relocates six asylum-seeker families to Luxembourg.

### 05 November

UNHCR launches Winterisation Plan for the Refugee Crisis in Europe, Appealing for USD 96.15 million November 2015 – February 2016.

### 08 November

Germany scales back its welcome to refugees coming from Syria and reinstates Dublin regulation.

### 11 November

Slovenia announces that it is erecting a razor-wire fence along the border with fellow EU member state Croatia.

### 18 November

Selective entry procedures are introduced by FYRo Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, permitting only those formerly resident in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to cross.

### 27 November

Austria starts constructing a fence along its southern border with Slovenia.

### 28 November

Macedonia starts constructing a fence on its southern border with Greece.

### 29 November

EU and Turkey finalise their agreement, under which Turkey is to increase border patrols and crack down on human-trafficking.

### 01 December

A Hungarian government sponsored xenophobic campaign is launched.

### 08 December

The number of asylum applications filed in Germany in 2015 reaches 1 million

### 22 December

Greek border police evict 2,000 asylum-seekers camp in the Greek village of Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border. People who do not have Syrian, Iraqi or Afghan nationalities are sent back to Athens.

### 04 January

Sweden enforces new border controls: only people with passports or ID cards can enter the country by public transportation. Denmark begins temporary passport checks on the border with Germany and Slovenia restricts entries.

### 05 January

IOM said in a statement that 3,771 people died attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea on vessels in 2015.

### 06 January

First cases of hypothermia are detected among refugees in Serbia.

SEPT

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

Sources: International Media,  
UNHCR Data portal,  
European Union News Room,

## GREECE (CONTINUED)

**Crisis onset and migration route:** Greece is the frontline European country for nearly all migrants arriving from Turkey, with almost 100% crossing by sea to Greek islands. Conditions and responses vary widely between different islands. Upon arrival, all migrants must register in order to obtain the documents permitting their onward ferry travel to the Greek mainland. These documents exempt them from being arrested/deported for a period of 30 days.

Arrivals surged to record levels in early spring 2015, quickly accelerating to a peak of over 211,000 arrivals in October – 50 times the previous year's arrivals in that month. A four-day ferry strike in early November significantly strained conditions on all islands as new arrivals vied for limited resources with those who were registered but unable to continue their journeys. (UNHCR, 06/11/2015)

Since September 2015, following public outcry (and resultant increased resources) following the widespread publication of photos of a drowned toddler, the northern island of Lesbos has grown to be the hub of the international humanitarian response to sea crossings. The island receives well over half of all arrivals in Greece. Lesbos is home to two transit camps, providing temporary shelter and other basic services to new arrivals: Kare Tepe, and nearby Moria, which also houses the only operational EU Hotspot in Greece (more are planned for other islands). The EU establishes hotspots on external borders facing unusually high migratory pressure, providing facilities for identification, registration, fingerprinting, and referral to asylum procedures/ relocation. Fewer than 1,000 migrants in Greece have applied for relocation to other EU member states through the hotspot system. (EC 15/12/2015).

Other Greek islands to the south each receive fewer than a quarter of the arrivals to Lesbos. In descending order, they are: Chios, Samos, Kos, Leros, Agathonisi, and Kalymnos.

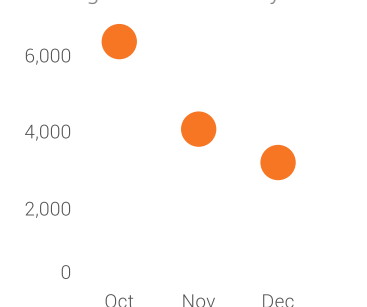
From the islands, most migrants travel by ferry, for which they must pay, to mainland Greece. After landing in mainland Greece (Piraeus/Athens, Kavala, or more rarely Thessaloniki), most migrants immediately continue their journey by bus to the Idomeni border crossing into FYRo Macedonia.

On 18 November 2015, the government of FYRo Macedonia limited passage through the Idomeni (Greece) border crossing, allowing entry only to Afghans, Iraqis, and Syrians which led to a build-up of around 3,000 migrants from other countries on the Greek side. On 9 December, following weeks of protests and clashes with police, Greek authorities cleared the temporary camp, forcibly bussing people to temporary accommodation in

Athens. Since then the Greek authorities have actively prevented the establishment of any camp near the border forcing non-Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan migrants to return to Athens, where they receive temporary accommodation and humanitarian assistance.

**Migration in numbers:** Over 851,000 migrants transited through Greece in 2015. During December 2015 an average of almost 3,200 arrived daily in Greece. (UNHCR 31/12/2015)

Average number of daily arrivals



**Country context:** Greece's longstanding economic crisis and resultant uncertainties in 2015 over its future in both the Eurozone and the EU compounded the broader challenge of responding to the migrant issue, which is decidedly not a political priority. Government instability combined with severe austerity has increased reliance on outside humanitarian actors. The humanitarian community has been critical of the national and local government's burdensome bureaucratic requirements and low capacity to respond efficiently to fast-changing conditions.

## FYRo MACEDONIA

### Key points

- + The Government facilitates the quick transit of people through the country and has put in place facilities to accommodate people for a few hours in Vinjug at the Gevgelija border crossing with Greece and Tabanovce. However, the winter weather is slowing the transit of migrants which requires increased winterised accommodation and services capacity in the transit centre in Tabanovce.
- + Attempts to cross the border illegally are expected to increase following the denial of entry to all except Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis.



**Crisis onset and migration route:** Over the summer of 2015, FYRo Macedonia saw a growing number of migrants at its border with Greece. Due to the influx of people, the country changed its 'Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection' on 16 June 2015. Migrants now must obtain a document that allows them to legally transit through and leave the country within a period of 72 hours.

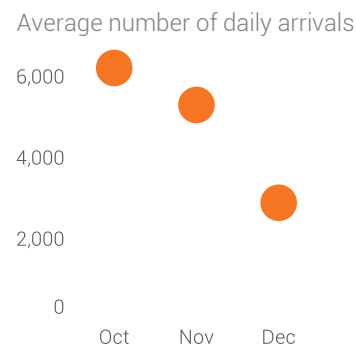


The high number of people arriving at the border resulted in tensions which erupted into clashes on 20 August 2015, in the wake of which a state of emergency was declared as a temporary measure. (NYT 20/08/2015, NYT, 21/10/2015) In September 2015, the Macedonian parliament extended this measure until June 2016. (AP, 04/10/2015) FYRo Macedonia was one of the countries that started screening nationalities on 18 November 2015. On 28 November 2015, the country began to erect a fence along its border with Greece in an attempt to limit the influx.

Migrants who are allowed to enter the country at the Idomeni (Greece)/ Gevgelija (FYRo Macedonia) border crossing receive their registration document at the Gevgelija reception centre. Initially police were only able to register one-third to one-half of all people entering the country. From December 2015, all people entering are formally registered. (UNDG 09/12/2015) From Gevgelija, migrants mostly continue their transit directly to the Macedonian-Serbian border at the Tabanovce reception centre (FYRo Macedonia). (w2eu.info, 10/2015) People travel by bus, train, or taxi and have to pay for their journey. Concerns remain over the fact that migrants have to walk several kilometres from Tabanovce to Miratovac, the transit camp on the Serbian side of the border, along a path with muddy sections and two streams with no bridges.

**Country context:** Cooperation between FYRo Macedonia and Greece is hampered by the long running dispute over the use of the name Macedonia. During the EU Summit on the European Refugee Crisis on 18 October 2015, the need for bilateral border-related confidence measures, in particular the strengthening of border cooperation, between Greece and Macedonia was specifically mentioned. (independent.mk, 26/10/2015) The migrant transit issue comes at a time of political difficulties in the country. Trust in the Government was severely damaged following revelations that the current government, under Prime Minister Gruevski, misused national security services to wiretap conversations of top officials in the public administration, prosecutors, judges and political opponents. (ABC, 17/05/2015; NYT, 21/06/2015; Crisisgroup, 09/07/2015) In EU-mediated talks in July 2015, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski agreed to step down by 15 January 2016. (NYT 15/07/2015) Early elections are planned for 24 April 2016.

**Migration in numbers:** Almost 383,000 migrants have transited through FYRo Macedonia between 19 June 2015, when the country first started registering migrants, and 29 December 2015. On average, almost 2,900 people arrived per day in December 2015. (UNHCR 31/12/2015) The country has 2,000 short-term winterised accommodation places in the transit centre in Vinojug where people can take a rest.



## SERBIA

### Key points

- + As in other countries, people are transiting too fast to be able to receive services other than the provision of food and NFIs. Protection issues, especially regarding children and unaccompanied minors, are not being addressed sufficiently.
- + Humanitarian workers have limited access to registration areas and only a small number of NGOs are permitted to operate inside. The situation is further complicated by the fact that different government institutions have legal responsibility for the various registration centres.
- + The availability of shelter and the high running costs of shelters remain issues.



**Crisis onset and migration route:** In June 2015, Hungary announced plans to erect a fence on its border with Serbia. Its completion made the transit from Serbia to Hungary difficult and resulted in, a new migration route from Serbia to Croatia. The main point of registration is the Preševo centre, just north of the border with FYRo Macedonia. From Preševo, migrants continue their journey by bus, for which they must pay, to the border with Croatia, where until November, migrants exited on foot at the Berkasovo/Bapska border crossing. (UNHCR 02/11/2015)

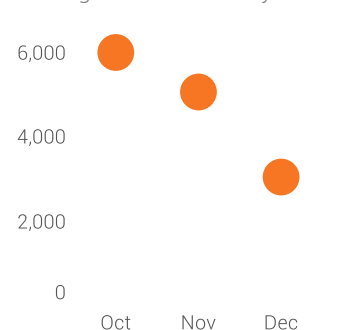
At the beginning of November, authorities in Croatia established a new special train service which takes migrants from the train station of Šid (Serbia) directly to the reception centre in Slavonski Brod (Croatia) free of charge. Šid has a winterised centre and upon entry into Serbia the transport of migrants to Šid is relatively well-organised. (UNHCR 06/11/2015) People mostly use busses, and to a lesser extent trains or taxis, to travel through the country. They need to pay for the journey.

An increasing number of migrants cross into Serbia via the Bulgarian border and register at the reception centre in Dimitrovgrad (Serbia), where they take buses to Belgrade. Service provision along the various border crossing points with Bulgaria is limited.

**Migration in numbers:** In 2015, almost 550,700 registered migrants transited through Serbia. Around 3,000 arrived on average per day in December 2015. (UNHCR 31/12/2015) The country has a capacity of 3,000 to 6,000 places for temporary accommodation.

**Country context** On 14 December 2015, the first formal round of substantive EU accession talks was launched. Serbia was granted candidate status in 2012 after taking steps to normalise relations with former province Kosovo. The start of the accession process facilitates the implementation of EU instruments in response to the migrant crisis in the country. To strengthen its mandate during the EU negotiations, the Government has proposed to hold early elections in 2016. The date has not yet been set. (Balkaninsight 24/09/2015, Balkaninsight 15/10/2016, EU 23/11/2015)

Average number of daily arrivals



## CROATIA

### Key points

- + The government prioritises accelerating transit times over increasing accommodation capacity. As in other countries, fast transit hinders aid agencies' ability to provide health assistance and assistance to unaccompanied minors. Family separation due to rapid processing at the reception centre is also a concern.

**Crisis onset and migration route:** Large numbers of migrants began arriving in Croatia on 16 September 2015 after Hungary closed its border with Serbia. Due to the large influx of people, Croatia closed off seven of its eight border points with Serbia two days after people began arriving (AFP, 19/10/2015) and opened a transit centre in Opatovac (Croatia) at the border with Serbia for registration, food and medical support for migrants. (Unifed, 22/09/2015) People crossing the border at Berkasovo (Serbia) - Bapska (Croatia) were transported to the transit centre at Opatovac (UNHCR, 08/10/2015), and, after registration, by bus and train to the Slovenian border. Opatovac transit centre was closed down in early November 2015, and consequently the arrival of migrants to the Berkasovo-Bapska border crossing stopped. Instead, the Winter

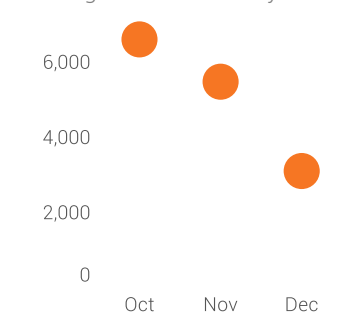


Reception and Transit Centre (WRTC) in Slavonski Brod (Croatia) became operational. The Centre has a capacity to accommodate 5,000 people. The agreement between Serbia and Croatia in early November to take people by train with no charge from Šid (Serbia) directly to the Slavonski Brod Camp (Croatia) for registration vastly improved the transportation situation (welcome, 29/10/2015). After registration in the centre, people board trains free of charge directly to Dobova in Slovenia.

**Migration in numbers:** Over 552,071 migrants have transited through Croatia between September and 29 December 2015. More than 3,000 people per day arrived on average in December 2015. (UNHCR 31/12/2015) The country has 5,000 winterised temporary accommodation places.

**Country context** In November 2015, Croatia's first parliamentary elections after accession to the EU in 2013 resulted in a hung parliament. Coalition talks are ongoing and while no government emerges, the fiscal consolidation and structural reform processes are paralysed and it is unclear what the stance of a new government towards the migrant issue might be.

Average number of daily arrivals



## SLOVENIA

### Key points

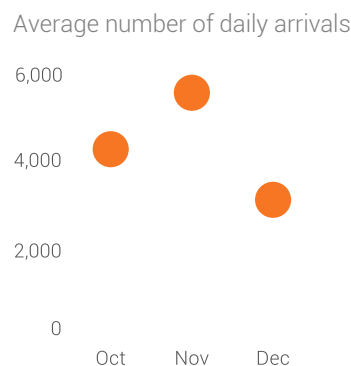
- + Migrants spend a very short time in Slovenia and it is therefore challenging to provide them with information and to identify those that are vulnerable.
- + With a population of 2,000,000, Slovenia has limited capacity to deal with the influx of people. (Guardian 21/10/2015, Reuters 20/20/2015) The shortage of resources in country to deal with the migration issue is a risk should migrants get stranded or resources be needed for other emergency situations, such as flooding or severe winter conditions. Although collaboration has improved, some gaps remain in coordination and information flow between the government and humanitarian actors.
- + There are negative perceptions of migrants among local communities and authorities. Fear, racism, Islamophobia and hate speech have been observed on social media.



**Crisis onset and migration route:** Slovenia became a transit country following the decision of Hungary to close its borders with Croatia. In the first few weeks of Slovenia being part of the main transit route, migrants were dropped off at a Croatian train stop near the Croatia-Slovenia border and continued on foot to the Slovenian border village of Rigonice. In October, Slovenia temporarily limited the number of entries. As a consequence, Croatia held back migrants from its own territory. This in turn led to more than 10,000 migrants being stuck in Serbia. (Guardian 19/10/2015) Following an agreement between Croatia and Slovenia, starting 28 October 2015 Croatian trains carried people from the then reception centre in Opatovac (Croatia), later the winterised reception centre in Slavonski Brod (Croatia), at the Serbian – Croatian border directly to Dobova in Slovenia. (The Slovenia Times 28/10/2015) From there, people continue to be transferred by train to the Sentilj (Slovenia) – Spielfeld (Austria) border crossing with Austria, or, to a lesser extent, to the Jesenice (Slovenia) – Villach (Austria) border crossing (UNHCR 06/11/2015) by bus. All transport is free.

**Migration in numbers:** As of 29 December 2015 almost 374,000 migrants have transited through Slovenia since 16 October 2015, when statistics were first collected by the Slovenian Police. Over 3,100 people arrived on average per day in December 2015. (UNHCR 31/12/2015) The country has short-term accommodation for 7,000 individuals, and 2,000 spaces for longer-term accommodation. Another 2,000-3,000 places are planned.

**Country context:** Relationships with neighbouring Croatia have become more tense since Slovenia started erecting a fence along the common border between the two countries. Public finances in Slovenia are strained. The Government is struggling to reduce its budget deficit. Resulting austerity measures continue to impact the capacity of Government institutions and civil society organisations to provide services to migrants and in the civil sector there are concerns about lack of funding in 2016. (EIU 16/12/2015, UNHCR 12/2014) There are also concerns that Austria has limited the number of people it is allowing in, as Slovenia sees the possibility of a backlog of migrants in its own territory.



## TURKEY

Turkey is the main transit country for those arriving in Greece as well as host to over 2.2 million Syrian refugees. (UNHCR 10/12/2016) Developments in the country therefore have the potential to drastically change the scope and scale of the crisis in Europe.

- + **To Turkey:** Most Syrians cross into Turkey over land. Those with valid travel documents can enter legally through one of the border crossings, although there is anecdotal information of Syrians with documentation being pushed back into Syria. (HRW 23/11/2015) There is no comprehensive information available on how other nationalities commonly enter Turkey.
- + **In Turkey:** More than half of the registered Syrian population in the countries bordering Syria reside in Turkey. However, initial assessments suggest this refugee population is not moving in great numbers to Europe – most Syrians arriving in Greece came (almost) directly from Syria without residing in Turkey for longer periods of time. (UNHCR 08/12/2015) Nevertheless the situation could rapidly change, the situation can also rapidly change if the security situation in Turkey further deteriorates. Movement from Turkey to Europe is likely to reduce if Syrians are granted access to the formal labour market. Only 6,000 work permits have been issued to Syrians since 2011 and most of those working resorted to employment in the informal market. (ILO 30/12/2015) Facilitating formal employment for Syrians could result in more Syrians choosing Turkey as the preferred country to reside until return to Syria is possible.
- + **From Turkey:** On 22 November 2015, after Turkey temporarily stepped up border controls, the number of arrivals to Greece dropped to 76, compared to 4,737 two days earlier. A week later, on 28 November, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement, under which Turkey is to receive €3bn to crack down on human-trafficking and reduce the number of migrants travelling to Greece. (The Economist 30/11/2015) However, the Government is not yet able or willing to prevent movement to Greece – large numbers of people continue to arrive in Greece and several media articles highlight how smugglers are still able to openly operate in Turkish coastal towns. (IRIN 4/12/2015, The Guardian 29/11/2015)

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