



STRATEGY FOR UNHCR ENGAGEMENT IN MIXED MOVEMENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Revision October 2021

Front cover: Tatiana, 50, kisses her son Rostislav, 11, in the kitchen of their apartment. The two fled their home country and have been granted international protection in Montenegro, February 2019

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UNHCR, October 2021

Regional Bureau for Europe



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Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNHCR staff distributes life-saving and non-food items to mitigate an emerging humanitarian crisis in midst of winter, following closure of the camp Lipa in Una Sana Canton,
December 2020

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Overview

Since 2015, the Western Balkans, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo* (Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)), have comprised a key—and shifting—migration route for asylum-seekers and migrants seeking refuge and better lives in western and northern Europe. While numbers remain far off the 2015/16 peak, when hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and others travelled or reached Europe via the ‘Balkan route’, it remains a key channel for people on the move—and an increasingly urgent policy challenge within and beyond Europe. Addressing mixed movements of refugees and migrants via the ‘Balkan route’ requires a collective, coordinated and holistic response.

Mixed movements in the Western Balkans are generally comprised of people who have previously transited through a number of countries, including European Union (EU) Member States where they could have or might have sought international protection (and in some instances, may have been granted international protection). Many are compelled to move onward by delays in asylum procedures, the intention to join family members in other EU Member States, and for perceived better conditions elsewhere.¹

While several routes exist, two main corridors are used by the majority of people on the move—one via Turkey-Greece-North Macedonia-Serbia and a second route traversing Turkey-Greece-Albania-Montenegro-Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Refugees and migrants face manifold risks,

hardships and dangers on either route. States respond with a range of deterrence measures, including resorting to systematic, and sometimes violent pushbacks at the borders along the route, in contravention of established international human rights and refugee protection principles and norms. The result is that people are frequently stranded along the route, often in dire, dangerous conditions.

Asylum-seekers and migrants therefore rely primarily on smuggling networks to facilitate secondary movement, exposing them to a range of protection risks including physical abuse, robbery, gender-based violence (GBV), human trafficking, and, in some instances, arbitrary detention. Despite—or perhaps because of—the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans region is currently experiencing a significant uptick in new arrivals from the Middle East and Central Asia, underscoring the urgency to find new solutions to a longstanding and ever-evolving challenge.

Against this backdrop, **capitalizing on the tradition of hosting forcibly displaced persons, UNHCR’s strategy aims to support the strengthening of national asylum systems and related processes in the Western Balkans to provide protection and viable solutions to refugees and asylum seekers.** This will be done within the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which recognizes that sustainable solutions can only be achieved through solidarity, responsibility-sharing, and

¹ International refugee law does not confer upon refugees the right to choose their country of asylum. It also does not authorize their irregular movement between successive countries solely in order to benefit from more favourable conditions. Refugees and asylum-seekers have duties and obligations to respect national laws and measures to maintain public order, including obligations to cooperate with the asylum process, which may include presenting themselves to authorities and submitting asylum claims promptly, or complying with conditions to regularize their stay. See, UNHCR, Guidance on Responding to Irregular Onward Movement of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, September 2019, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5d8a255d4.html>

collaboration across all sectors of society. Complementary and joined-up approaches to strengthen asylum management and foster possibilities for integration and inclusion are at the core of UNHCR's strategic engagement in the region. Enhanced, effective engagement with partners is therefore foundational to UNHCR's new approach. In particular—and given the nature and profiles of populations on the move in the Western Balkans—the strategy is premised upon continued collaboration and complementarity with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The strategy outlines two multifaceted priority areas of focus, namely: (1) improving

protection and response capacity, and (2) creating conditions for solutions for refugees.

Building on its 40-year presence in the region, UNHCR is well-positioned to support its transition to one that welcomes, protects and includes asylum-seekers and refugees. UNHCR staff have a deep knowledge of the historical context, longstanding relationships with a national and municipal authorities, and the trust of communities familiar with the hardships of forcible displacement.



Unaccompanied and separated children learn geography in a government school in Belgrade, April 2018

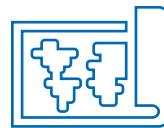
Core Principles



Focus on UNHCR's persons of concern

This strategy is focused on persons who are seeking and are interested in receiving international protection in the Western Balkans, persons from so-called refugee-producing countries* who have specific needs (such as unaccompanied and separated children, single-headed families, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), persons with disabilities, etc.) as well as persons who have already been granted international protection in the region or elsewhere.

*In the Western Balkans region, this refers to countries that have protection recognition rates in the EU of more than 20% in 2019 such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.



Regional Coherence

The strategy takes into account and is compatible with other already ongoing international efforts in the region, including, among others, the EU pre-Accession process, EASO Roadmaps, Frontex cooperation agreements, the “UN Action Plan for the Western Balkans”, and the U Strategy for Western Balkans “. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement for the Western Balkans”, which was adopted by the European Council in 2017. This strategy also takes into consideration the opportunities contained in the proposed EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.



Institutional Alignment

The recommended actions set forth in this strategy reflect, inter alia, the High Commissioner’s Strategic Directions, the 2030 UN Reform Agenda, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).





Incremental and context- specific approaches

The asylum systems in the Western Balkans are all in varying stages of development - and hence, efforts need to be made to ensure that what is being done in one place should not negatively impact others; at the same time, positive achievements should be promoted and supported within the broader EU accession process and may also be duplicated in the entire region.



Partnerships

In line with the GCR, this strategy requires engagement with a broad range of actors. Therefore, UNHCR will seek to strengthen its partnership with concerned authorities, EU institutions and agencies, EU Member and other interested states, Resident Coordinators (RCs), IOM and relevant UN agencies, regional organizations, and other interested external stakeholders including civil society organizations, private sector and refugee communities.



Theory of Change

UNHCR's theory of change in the Western Balkans is built on a number of interrelated factors and assumptions. These include:

- The public remains supportive of the right to seek asylum—and the obligation to provide protection and refuge to those fleeing conflict;
- Sufficient political will exists or can be built by concerned authorities in the region to reform asylum systems and improve efficiency;
- National asylum systems in the Western Balkans are at different stages of development, requiring differentiated approaches by UNHCR and partners to meet strategic objectives for the region;
- Coordinated actions by stakeholders and partners working in a joined-up, complementary way can foster positive change and progress toward achieving regional strategic objectives;
- Sufficient space exists (or can be built) for recognized refugees to integrate and be included in the social and economic fabric of host societies;
- The perceptions of people on the move regarding optimal final destinations are somewhat flexible, dependent on their ability to access protection and solutions rather than geography alone;
- The evolution of the Western Balkans as a region in which asylum systems and other related processes are fully supported in protecting refugees and offering viable prospects for integration and inclusion is a long-term endeavor. Success in one place can carry ripple effects on progress in others;
- EU Member States (EU MS) and other concerned stakeholders demonstrate solidarity and support the region. Safe and legal pathways are made available in Western Balkans and EU countries, including for purposes of family reunification, education exchange and labour mobility schemes as well as humanitarian admission options;

Desired Change

The Western Balkans is a region that offers meaningful protection and viable solutions to refugees and asylum seekers in need of international protection.

Outcome 1

People on the move interested in seeking international protection (including those with specific needs) are identified, referred to the asylum system and have their claims assessed in a timely manner through fair and efficient asylum procedures

Outcome 2

Asylum-seekers and recognized refugees are able to access the protection of authorities in the Western Balkans

Outcome 3

Recognized refugees are gradually included and integrated into host societies

Outcome 4

People found not to be in need of international protection and/or who are not eligible for legal stay due to compelling humanitarian reasons are returned to countries of origin, with a preference for voluntary return and reintegration support

Outputs

- Asylum systems in the Western Balkans strengthened and procedures improved, capacity increased
- Regional systems/approaches to registration and documentation promoted
- Western Balkans authorities supported in implementing differentiated procedures for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

Outputs

- Persons of concern are protected from refoulement
- Refugees are able to access services on par with nationals
- Asylum seekers and refugees are provided with documentation which guarantees access to basic rights
- Reception conditions ensure human dignity and meet applicable human rights standards including for persons with specific needs

Outputs

- Changes in the legal and administrative frameworks within the Western Balkans to ensure effective access to state services promoted
- Municipalities are supported to ensure outreach/ inclusion of refugees in local service provision
- Local communities are supported to promote social cohesion and pilot initiatives to support local integration
- Refugees have access to language and vocational training, access to education, and livelihoods, enabling them to restart lives

Outputs

- Readmission agreements with countries of origin established
- Strengthened role of specialized partners (i.e. Frontex, IOM) is advocated
- Regional cooperation to implement existing readmission agreements and manage return promoted
- Support for reintegration in countries of origin is advocated

Areas to strengthen to improve protection and response capacity

A. Access to territory and asylum procedures and identification of asylum-seekers and persons with specific needs for appropriate referrals

The internationally recognized right to seek asylum for which access to territory is an essential pre-condition is not systematically ensured and is often arbitrarily denied. The identification and referral mechanisms for people wishing to seek international protection and/ or with specific needs or vulnerabilities are either weak or poorly implemented, including for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), who constitute the most vulnerable group among the migrants and asylum-seekers arriving in the Western Balkans. The quality of services and conditions in reception facilities for asylum seekers and migrants differs greatly amongst as well as within the Western Balkans region. Many are neither protection-sensitive nor in line with good practice standards. The overall lack of capacity within the Western Balkans' asylum systems has contributed to sub-standard, differentiated approaches. This blurs the distinction between migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, prohibits the provision of essential protection and support to vulnerable groups, and contributes to misperceptions of both international and national actors at various levels as regards applicable mandates and appropriate responsibility-sharing mechanisms.

Despite new asylum legislation in several countries, most remain focused on providing short-term reception, rather than fully assuming protection responsibilities for those wishing to pursue the asylum process. This is compounded by the fact that most people on the move (regardless of international protection needs) appear determined to proceed towards Western or Northern Europe. Therefore, most asylum-seekers and migrants consider their stay in the Western Balkans as temporary, even if they have expressed their intention to, or actually do apply for asylum. Moreover, the current policy responses in the region often result in de facto containment of people, which neither prevents eventual dangerous onward movements nor enables the provision of international protection to those in need, nor does it offer the possibility of solutions for individuals and for authorities, including the return of those not in need of international protection to their countries of origin.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Strengthen protection-sensitive migration management and asylum systems through cooperation with national authorities in the Western Balkans, as well as with EU agencies, such as the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) through the “IPA II Regional support to protection-sensitive migration management in Western Balkans and Turkey” project and other related instances of cooperation at various levels;
- Support authorities in the establishment of fair and efficient asylum procedures based on a systematic triaging of caseloads and referral to adequate processing modalities such as simplified or accelerated asylum procedures for presumably manifestly unfounded and manifestly well-founded cases;²
- Work with concerned authorities in the Western Balkans to improve the identification and/or appropriate referral of those with international protection needs and/or vulnerabilities, safeguard the respect of the principle of non-refoulement and access to fundamental rights, and ensure that legitimate measures to control entry at the border are not applied arbitrarily and allow asylum-seekers to be identified and given access to asylum procedures;
- Support the authorities to adapt their asylum systems and integrate the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic which ensure access to the territory and preserve the right to seek asylum while implementing preventive public health policies;
- Encourage cross-regional cooperation, including regular exchange of information, interventions and referrals, not only within the region, but also with the neighbouring EU Member States (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia);
- Advocate for the application of migration management standards including alternative options for legalized stay with due access to rights, lawful readmission and, as a final option, the return to country of origin of persons found not to be in need of international protection;
- Enhance the provision of information and two-way communication with communities, particularly at entry points to ensure that persons wishing to seek asylum and/or with specific needs have access to relevant and updated information about asylum procedures (in the language they understand) and available services in the relevant context. Encourage other actors to provide appropriate information to persons who may not have international protection needs to allow them to consider other available legal options to stay, or to facilitate eventual voluntary return;
- Strengthen community-based efforts to monitor and counter rumours and misinformation—including through UNHCR’s existing Telling the Real Story initiative, from smuggling networks amongst others, and to seek regular feedback from persons of concern to UNHCR on reception conditions, services and other factors that may affect decisions related to onward movement;
- Assist authorities in the region, in partnership with relevant actors, to prepare regular contingency planning based on early warning and well-coordinated needs-assessments to establish mechanisms that can be activated in case of continuous or increased movements;

² UNHCR, Discussion Paper Fair and Fast - Accelerated and Simplified Procedures in the European Union, 25 July 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b589ee4.html>.

B. Registration, coordinated data collection and management

Although several levels of data collection systems (macro as well as individual) exist, the registration of migrants and asylum-seekers is neither systematic nor harmonized between countries and territories. Currently, there is no established mechanism in line with data protection principles to verify whether an individual has already been registered, lodged an asylum application, or

been granted an international protection status in more than one place. This gap contributes to difficulties in ensuring access to asylum procedures for persons wishing to seek asylum on the one hand, while contributing to onward movements on the other hand, and as such jeopardizes the credibility of the asylum system as a whole.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Advocate with the EU to support the Western Balkans in establishing national biometric databases that are interoperable to register and document asylum seekers and migrants, and facilitate the identification of those who have already sought or found asylum in other countries (including EU MS to which they first arrived) with a view to identifying adapted solutions; noting that this database could serve as a stepping stone to the future integration of these countries in the EU's EURODAC database;
- Promote data-sharing agreements in line with data protection principles between the responsible authorities in the Western Balkans and neighbouring EU countries which could strengthen overall border and asylum/migration management and facilitate the identification and referral of asylum-seekers and persons with specific needs to appropriate procedures;
- Promote harmonization of registration tools and methodologies (including biometrics) in line with existing data protection standards to facilitate overall asylum case management and allow for timely support and assistance to persons with specific needs.

C. Support to asylum system development and quality assurance

The asylum systems are in various stages of development and the overall quality of procedures in terms of fairness and efficiency is neither fully tested nor established due to the low number of cases being processed. Where asylum legislation in the Western Balkans is fully aligned with the EU acquis, its implementation and practices often are not. However, a significant number of decisions are reached only on procedural grounds because of people

abandoning the procedure and not on material facts. In some contexts, judicial review is ensured at the third instance only, and courts generally limit their interventions to procedural aspects, without entering into the merits of the case. Despite the fact that some 46% of applicants are from countries that have a protection recognition rate over 20% in the EU, only a few cases are decided on the merits.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Foster stronger partnerships with EASO and Frontex to agree and implement coordinated and complementary interventions and capacity building support within and beyond the EU accession processes;
- Engage with concerned stakeholders to strengthen fair and efficient asylum adjudication and provide quality assurance support to asylum authorities in line with the respective needs;
- Build upon and reinvigorate long-standing support in the Western Balkans to further align legislation and practice with international law and standards;
- Support the development of quality standards with regard to Country of Origin Information (COI) research and products, including through establishment of COI databases, in coordination with EASO;
- Where relevant, support the implementation of accelerated and simplified procedures for both manifestly well-founded and unfounded cases in line with UNHCR's Discussion Paper Fair and Fast - Accelerated and Simplified Procedures in the European Union;³
- Support improved quality standards for case-management in order to ensure expedient processing of claims and the closure of cases that have abandoned their claim;
- Strengthen the capacity of legal aid providers and foster the identification of cases for strategic litigation at domestic courts and the European Court for Human Rights to establish legally binding benchmarks;

³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Discussion Paper Fair and Fast - Accelerated and Simplified Procedures in the European Union, 25 July 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b589eef4.html>

D. Access to basic rights and services

The asylum frameworks and legislation are generally aligned with international standards and the EU asylum acquis. However, implementation remains challenging throughout the region as asylum-seekers and refugees continue to lack effective access to protection and status determination hindering their ability to access their rights and services. Legislations in the Western Balkans provide access to education, social welfare and health to all refugees and asylum-seekers once they have officially lodged an asylum claim. However, access to these basic rights remains problematic as the asylum systems are often misused by migrants and asylum-seekers who lodge one or multiple asylum claims while continuing their onward journeys. This dynamic is detrimental to those who seek international protection in the region as it causes long delays in the determination of their refugee status which in turn guarantees access to these rights and services. Additional challenges include the lack of information on asylum and basic rights, the inconsistent availability and quality of interpretation and fragmented access to legal aid.

Asylum reception capacity in the region is uneven and ranges from functional reception centres run by authorities to overwhelmed centres supported by international actors who host both

migrants and asylum-seekers without distinction, often including people with specific needs such as unaccompanied children and families as well. Material assistance, psychosocial and legal counselling are provided by humanitarian agencies in the reception facilities primarily on an ad-hoc basis. Asylum-seekers and refugees living in private accommodation face additional impediments in accessing public services and meeting basic needs. This is primarily caused by language barriers and insufficiently capacitated public systems.

The provision of personal documentation is essential for the lawful stay and access to public services, especially health care, social assistance, education and employment services. However, from participatory assessments conducted in the region, asylum-seekers' main concerns relate to the delays in the provision of personal documentation. In terms of access to employment, asylum laws in the Western Balkans in some cases provide asylum-seekers with the right to free access to the labour market, if the asylum decision has not been rendered within nine months. In reality, asylum-seekers often cannot obtain a work permit without a personal identification number, which is only established once international protection is granted.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Advocate and support Western Balkans' authorities to implement better identification and processing systems preferably at entry points, in order to triage those seeking international protection from those interested in continuing their journey which should be managed outside the asylum system;
- Advocate for the timely provision of personal documentation to asylum-seekers and refugees to facilitate access to basic services;
- Strengthen the provision of legal aid by creating synergies between public systems (where they exist) and civil society service providers;
- Support cultural mediators who are recognized refugees to bridge the gaps between new asylum-seekers and local administration in order to help them navigate bureaucratic hurdles;

E. Solutions for persons without international protection needs

A significant number of persons moving through the region are presumably not in need of international protection nor do they have specific needs which require temporary protection or render them otherwise eligible to stay in the region. As such, they should be returned in compliance with essential safeguards to their countries of origin, with a preference for voluntary return and reintegration support, following a determination of their claim in fair and efficient asylum procedures.

However, returns generally do not take place due to a combined result of asylum procedures not

being efficient, a lack of readmission agreements with countries of origin, a lack of cooperation by countries of origin as well as insufficient resources to implement readmission agreements and experience in managing such a process.

This places a heavy burden on the reception and assistance capacities in the Western Balkans. In addition, the inability to provide an effective and efficient response to persons who are not in need of international protection affects the credibility of the asylum systems and creates problematic incentives.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Promote and foster the understanding of the importance of efficient asylum processing in the broader context of protection-sensitive migration management as well as further requirements to implement the return of persons without international protection;
- Strategically engage with different interlocutors and partners in the EU to support the development of protection-sensitive migration management that helps curb the current use of the asylum systems for migratory objectives;
- Advocate with key interlocutors for viable solutions, notably returns, for people not found to be in need of international protection.

Activities to Build Conditions for Durable Solutions

A. Enhance local integration prospects for persons of concern to UNHCR

Limited integration prospects in the Western Balkans, misperceptions and misinformation, and the influence of smuggling networks remain important elements in the decision-making of people to move onwards, including those who are likely to be in need of international protection. While basic normative frameworks enabling the legal and socio-economic integration of refugees and persons who were granted subsidiary protection exist, authorities in the Western Balkans are at different stages in the development and implementation of their integration strategies and related action plans.

Overall, the competent authorities need to adopt legislation that facilitates integration and enhance action in support of the small number of people who have been granted international protection. In addition, and in line with the objectives of international solidarity and responsibility sharing of the Global Compact on Refugees, the Western Balkans should be encouraged to actively promote the inclusion/ local integration of refugees proportionate to their capacities rather than remaining in ‘transit mode’.

The relatively small number of people who are granted refugee or subsidiary protection makes it possible to explore innovative and individualized approaches to integration, taking into consideration specific situations, needs and individual skill sets. Moreover, the significant emigration of nationals from the Western Balkans to the EU has drastically increased the demand for labour locally, which provides opportunities to support refugees if they are willing to remain and effectively access labour markets. Access to decent and dignified employment and livelihoods is key to enabling refugees to become self-reliant, which requires specific interventions to ensure that individual refugees, households and communities are able to meet their basic needs (food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) as soon as possible and in a sustainable manner. There are areas of good practice and innovation that can be adapted and built upon.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Reorient activities from broadly targeting asylum-seekers at the exit points/areas in the Western Balkans towards a profiling and identification of cases who are likely in need of international protection with a view to prioritizing relocation to other areas away from exit points and expedited asylum processing, in partnership with the respective authorities;
- Promote an environment conducive to integration through an inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees in public services, including through advocacy for the issuance of personal documentation by the responsible authorities and unhindered access to services and rights by asylum-seekers and refugees through relevant modifications of legal frameworks and procedures and capacitate local authorities to provide these services;
- Actively engage with authorities at different levels to promote horizontal, inter-sectoral communication in order to coordinate activities in the area of integration;
- Foster social cohesion and inclusion at local and municipal levels by:
 - In cooperation with municipalities, strengthen and diversify channels of two-way
 - Engaging with municipalities as primary partners;
 - Sensitizing local authorities to the possible arrival and settlement of refugees in their municipalities by providing information on refugee protection principles, the legal framework, good practices in other municipalities, and sharing of individual stories of refugees in full respect of data protection principles;
 - Identifying “pilot- good example initiatives, as well as municipalities or cities” that could be recognized and presented as leaders in integrating refugees in the region;
 - Enhancing outreach to refugees, community mobilization and empowerment;

communication and information sharing with refugees and holders of subsidiary protection, based on their information and communications needs and preferences and with particular attention to UASC, women and girls, and persons with disabilities;

- Promote access to education for refugees and asylum-seekers by:
 - Facilitate the economic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers through small-scale targeted initiatives and tailor-made approaches with different actors - e.g. public employment offices, employers' associations and private sector entities;
 - Advocating for an increased investment of financial and human resources to ensure the inclusion of asylum-seeking and refugee children in enrolling in primary, secondary and tertiary education in the school systems;
 - Developing partnerships at the appropriate level with education ministries, civil society actors and the education sector to address challenges and share good practices;
 - Supporting the inclusion of refugee teachers in the Western Balkans' education systems and/or universities;
 - Mobilize support from other stakeholders that could contribute to initiatives that promote local integration (e.g. language training, job placement and housing, where possible);
 - Further build partnerships with actors that have significant presence in the region and are able to support employers/private sectors willing to train and employ refugees and asylum-seekers;

B. Access to safe and legal pathways

The region continues to witness the onward movement of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees who either abandon their asylum claims or protection status or do not seek international protection in Western Balkans at all. The predominant determination among this population on the move to reach Western or Northern EU countries, coupled with strict controls at EU external borders and frequent pushbacks create the risk of exploitation, violence and abuse, especially for women and UASCs. Effectively ensuring that asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants are aware of their legal options and adequately supported in pursuing them is thus a key priority. This support must be premised on the fact that persons do not have an unfettered right under international law to choose their country of asylum. At the same time, some

have legitimate reasons such as close family or other effective links for wanting to reach and seek protection in a specific country or territory, either within the Western Balkans or the EU. Therefore, to reduce irregular and dangerous journeys, safe and legal pathways should be made available in Western Balkans and EU countries, including effective and efficient family reunification procedures, education and labour schemes as well as humanitarian admission options. Existing traditions in the Western Balkan region, such as receiving foreign students, could be built on to provide opportunities for persons with international protection needs residing in main refugee hosting countries to travel safely to the Western Balkan region, thereby contributing to international solidarity in the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees.

UNHCR Plan of Action

- Increase advocacy efforts with EU MS to promote safe and legal pathways for family reunification, education exchange programmes and labour mobility schemes;
- Identify cases with close family and other effective links in EU countries to advocate for the establishment of safe and legal pathways to these countries;
- Foster exchange between universities in Europe to promote access to scholarships for refugees in the Western Balkans;



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Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNHCR provides protection counselling to a female asylum-seeker from Iran, October 2019

Way forward

The strengthening of national asylum systems and related processes in the Western Balkans to provide protection and viable solutions to refugees and asylum seekers will be neither straightforward nor will it happen overnight. However, everyone has a stake in addressing mixed movements through the region in a holistic, rights-based manner, which upholds the right to seek asylum and the obligations of all Western Balkans' authorities. The asylum systems in the Western Balkans are at different stages of development and will require different, strengthened modes of support and partnership. There are, however, interdependencies and opportunities that can only be addressed through a regional approach and the sustained, coordinated efforts of UNHCR and a range of partners and stakeholders with different expertise. While the Western Balkans are at different stages of development—requiring tailored engagement strategies at different levels—a number of common elements and priorities will drive UNHCR's regional strategy in the short term. These include:

- The successful implementation of the areas of intervention (or components) of the strategy will be contingent upon the possibility of building up effective systematic triaging of arrivals (at entry points) to identify and appropriately refer those who might have international protection needs from those who do not.

- Assuming proper identification can be conducted, arrivals should be referred to the relevant pathway to ensure a higher quality of assistance for those in need of it, whilst also enhancing overall efficiency of procedures. In that sense, supporting authorities to address key gaps in terms of length and quality of asylum procedures must be a priority.
- Hand in hand with better identification and referral mechanisms, UNHCR will coordinate closely with IOM and all partners to promote humane and rights-based solutions for all people on the move, including advocacy for other forms of legal stay, lawful readmission and possible return. Moreover, pursuing opportunities for successful integration and inclusion in host societies, or reintegration in countries of origin remains a core priority—and a shared interest of concerned authorities, regional institutions, and local civil societies.
- All UNHCR offices in the region will work with authorities at different levels and line ministries to make sure that the people who are granted refugee or subsidiary protection can effectively be integrated. This includes advocating for the elimination of administrative barriers (e.g. issuance of personal documentation) but also mobilizing authorities and host communities to support the integration efforts of those granted refugee status or subsidiary protection *in situ*.



UNHCR personnel accompanying a refugee family at the Tuzla airport, awaiting a flight to join their father in a EU country, January 2021



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