



MIXED MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE: CHALLENGES ALONG THE ROUTE AND DRIVERS OF ONWARD MOVEMENTS

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Cover photograph:

Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNHCR staff distributes life-saving and non-food items to mitigate an emerging humanitarian crisis in midst of winter.
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1. References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

Background

Mixed movements¹ in South-Eastern Europe represent a complex interplay of mobility patterns that involve refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. The region serves as both a transit area and a destination for various groups fleeing conflict, persecution, or seeking better economic opportunities. Arrivals to the region have primarily included individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, and Morocco amongst other countries.²

The journeys these people undertake are filled with challenges, from dangerous sea crossings to difficult overland routes. Along the way, many of them face serious risks, including exploitation by smugglers and traffickers. Upon arrival in the region, many encounter obstacles such as refusal of entry, and limited access to certain rights and services. At the same time, onward movement to other countries

in Europe continues to be driven by a number of factors including reuniting with family members, accessing asylum procedures and employment.

Understanding the complexities of mixed movements in South-Eastern Europe is essential for developing effective policies and responses. In this context, to ensure a better understanding of the profiles, needs, and experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and others involved in mixed movements, UNHCR and its partners have been conducting a protection monitoring exercise. In the first eight months of 2024, **3,237 interviews were conducted in Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia**. This report, complemented with focus group discussions conducted in some countries³, presents the main findings of these interviews.

COUNTRIES WHERE INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED



1. Mixed movements: The cross-border movement of people, generally in an irregular manner, involving individuals and groups who travel alongside each other, using similar routes and means of transport or facilitators, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have different needs and profiles and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children, stateless persons, and migrants (including migrants in irregular situations or migrants in vulnerable situations). [UNHCR master Glossary of terms](#).
2. UNHCR data portal available at [Situation South-Eastern Europe](#)
3. Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Serbia, North Macedonia

Key findings



63%

of respondents reported leaving their country of origin due to insecurity, threats to their life, and discrimination.



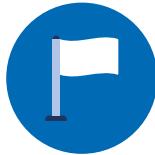
15%

of respondents had previously been prevented from entering their current host country – with 4% subjected to some form of violence or mistreatment in the process.



66%

of respondents have a destination country in mind, primarily due to family ties and/or employment opportunities.



44%

of respondents are willing to permanently stay in their current host country – mainly if they are granted legal status, the right to work, and/or the right to reunite with their families.



48%

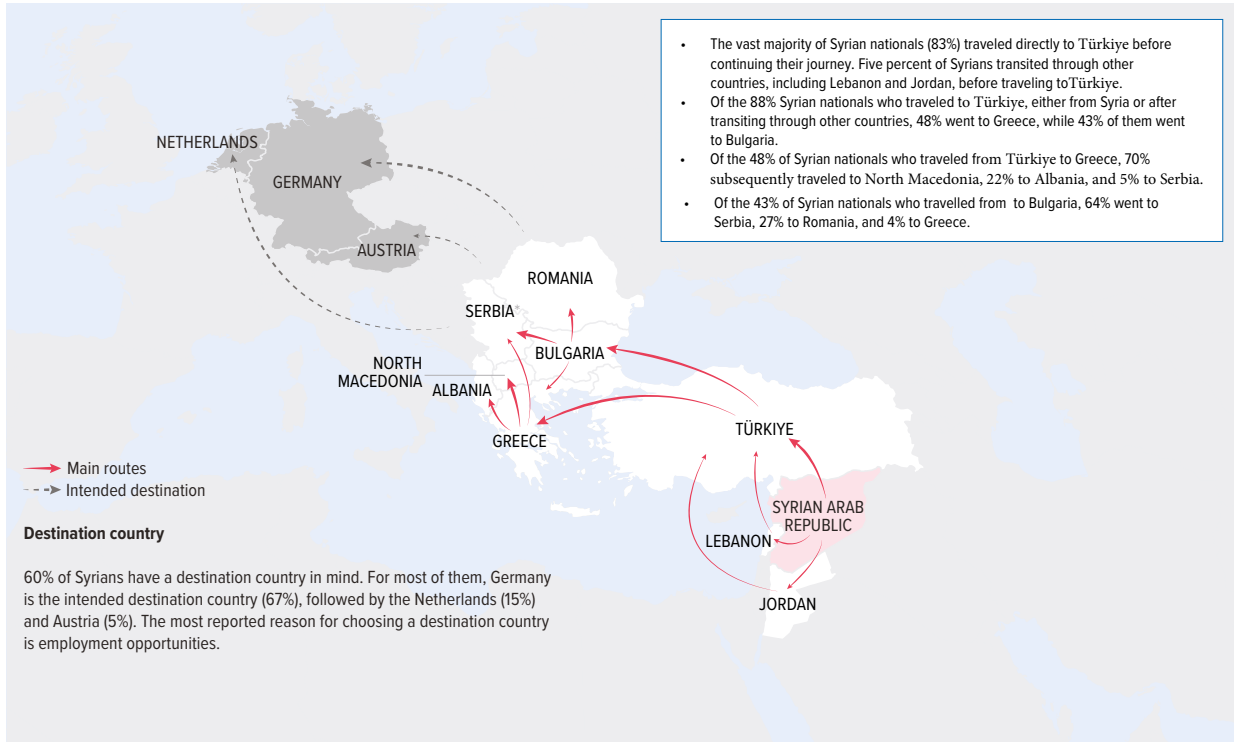
of respondents have applied for asylum in their host country, mostly in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, while an additional 20% have expressed an intention to apply for asylum. The remaining 32% have not applied for asylum, mostly because they plan to move elsewhere.



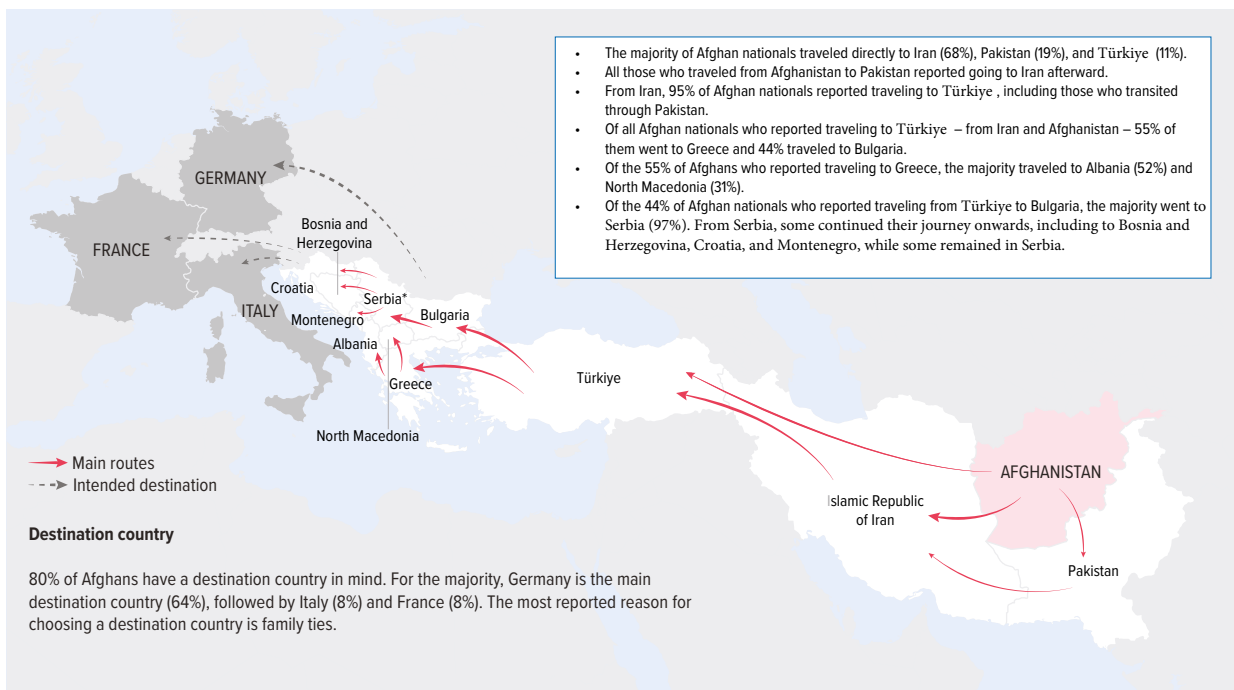
Lengthy asylum procedures, limited access to services and challenges with integration in the host countries are among the key drivers behind onward movements.

Route Analysis

MAIN ROUTES TAKEN BY SYRIAN RESPONDENTS



MAIN ROUTES TAKEN BY AFGHAN RESPONDENTS



Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. *Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]).

Demographic profiles



83%

of respondents are men



14%

of respondents are women



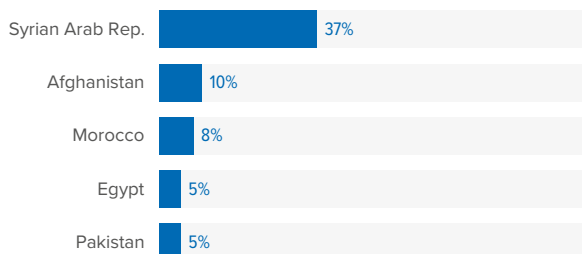
3%

of respondents are boys

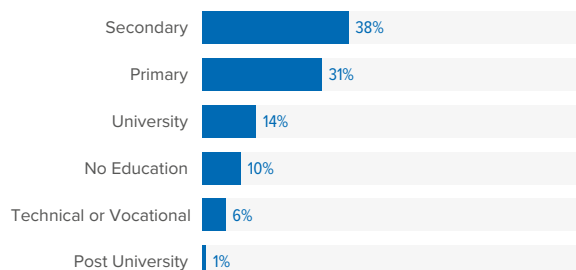
30

Average age of respondents

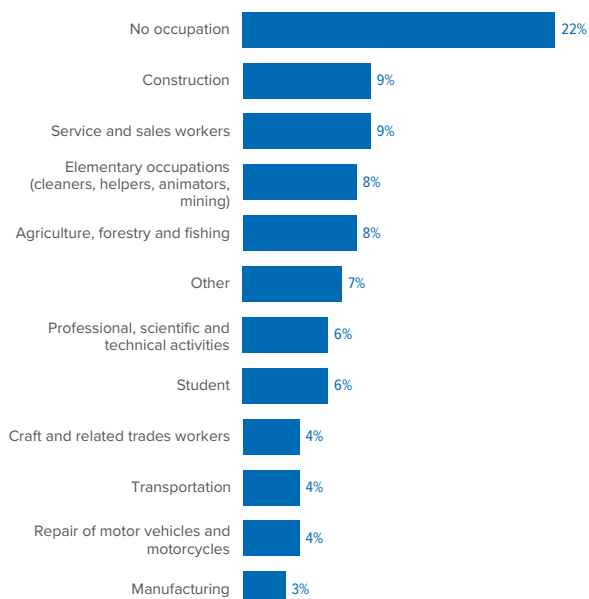
TOP 5 NATIONALITIES*



EDUCATION LEVEL



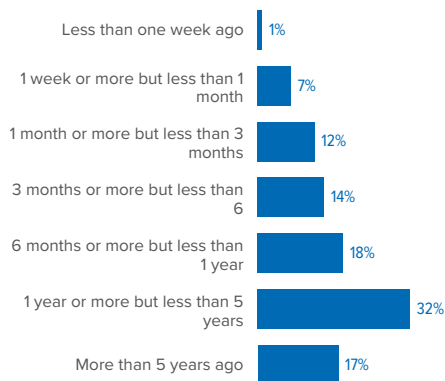
ACTIVITY IN THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



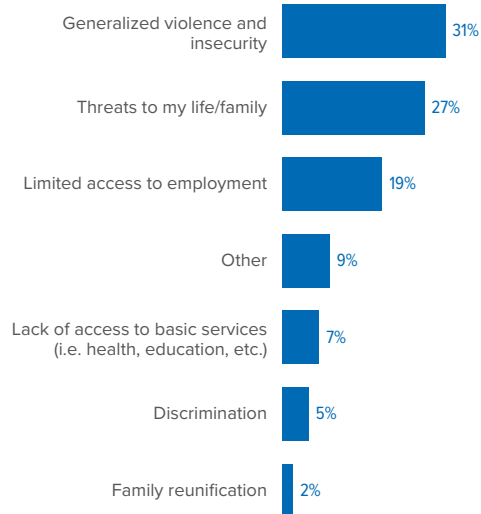
Motivations for Leaving Countries of Origin

The largest share of respondents (32%) left their country of origin over a year but less than five years before the time of the interview. Most respondents, 63%, reported that they were forced to flee their country of origin due to insecurity, threats to their life, and discrimination. Among the main nationalities interviewed, however, the reasons for leaving the country of origin vary. The vast majority of Afghan⁴ and Syrian nationals⁵ – 94% and 82% respectively – state that they were forced to flee because of insecurity, threats to their life, or discrimination, while 74% of Moroccan and 63% of Pakistani nationals indicated limited employment opportunities and/or a lack of access to basic services as the main driving factors.

TIMELINE: DEPARTURE FROM COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN



REASONS FOR LEAVING THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



Protection Challenges Along the Route

Among those interviewed, 15% mentioned that they had previously been prevented from entering their current host country on at least one occasion, with 4% experiencing some form of violence or mistreatment in the process. In many instances, rejections are carried out without legal and procedural safeguards and not following procedures aimed at identifying asylum-seekers and persons with specific needs.

Of those interviewed, 17% of respondents reported being returned at least once while trying to leave their current host country. Of these, 4% reported experiencing violence or mistreatment in the process. All respondents who were prevented from exiting Bosnia and Herzegovina were heading to Croatia, while most respondents who attempted to leave Serbia (51%) were aiming to reach Hungary.

4. For more information regarding Afghan refugees, look at [Situation Afghanistan situation](#) and [UNHCR Dataviz - Returns to Afghanistan](#)
 5. For more information regarding Syrian refugees, look at [Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response](#)

Access to Asylum

Twenty percent of all respondents reported having declared an intention to apply for asylum – the first step in the asylum application process in all jurisdictions included in the survey.⁶ The number of respondents who have not lodged a formal application for asylum after registering an intention to apply is particularly high in Montenegro (99%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (58%). In Montenegro, interviews were mainly conducted with newly arrived asylum seekers, which explains the high percentage of respondents who have not yet completed their application. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, the vast majority of arrivals are issued with an attestation to seek asylum – even if they do not need/seek international protection. In other cases, individuals lack access to asylum procedures, which prevents them from completing their application.

Out of the individuals interviewed, 48% have applied for asylum in their current host country, with 73% waiting for a decision on their application. In comparison, a higher share of respondents in Romania (99%), Bulgaria (96%), and Croatia (85%) reported applying for asylum. In contrast, a lower share of respondents who applied for asylum were recorded in Montenegro (1%), North Macedonia (3%), Serbia (10%), Albania (17%), Kosovo* (24%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (37%). Among the main nationalities interviewed, a higher share of Syrian nationals (52%) reported applying for asylum. It should be noted that, in many cases, people apply for asylum and travel onwards without receiving a decision on their application.⁷ Most of the applications therefore end up being closed.

Seventeen percent of respondents who have applied for asylum have been granted international protection. Most of them were granted subsidiary protection (71%), followed by refugee status (26%), and temporary protection status (3%). In several of the jurisdictions included in the survey, there is a

tendency to issue subsidiary protection even in cases involving Afghan and Syrian nationals, where conditions are likely met for the grant of refugee status. To illustrate, in the past five years (2019-2023), no person was granted refugee status in North Macedonia, while 99% and 96% of positive decisions in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively, resulted in subsidiary protection.

In some contexts, the rights attached to subsidiary protection status are more limited than those for refugee status. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, subsidiary protection beneficiaries do not have the right to family reunification, are not issued travel documentation, and are ineligible for permanent residency, undermining their integration prospects. Seven percent of respondents who applied for asylum reported the rejection of their application.

Of those interviewed, 32% of respondents have not applied for asylum, 79% of them due to plans to move elsewhere. In comparison, a higher share of respondents in Serbia (89%), Albania (83%), and Kosovo* (76%) reported not applying for asylum, mainly due to plan to travel onwards.

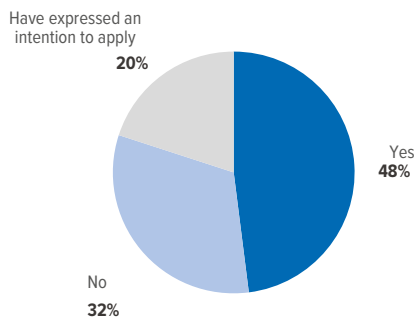
During focus group discussions, participants indicated a lack of information on how to apply for asylum as a significant challenge. The lack of access to information inordinately affects children and individuals in detention centers, as many of those interviewed reported not applying for asylum due to unawareness of associated procedures.

Focus group discussions also revealed that many people do not apply for asylum because of lengthy application and status determination processes. This is compounded by the lack of access to rights during the application process. In some contexts, asylum-seekers are neither permitted to work nor study while their application is pending, rendering the waiting period – which sometimes lasts several years – far more challenging. Many therefore feel compelled to move elsewhere.

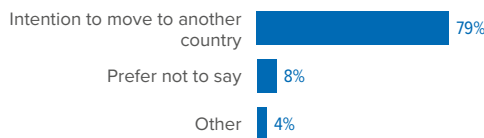
6. In all the countries included in the survey, there is a two-step asylum application process. The first step is to express an intention to apply for asylum. The second step is to formally lodge an asylum application .

7. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asywitha/default/table?lang=en&category=migr.migr_asy.migr_asyapp

ASYLUM APPLICATION STATUS



REASONS FOR NOT APPLYING FOR ASYLUM

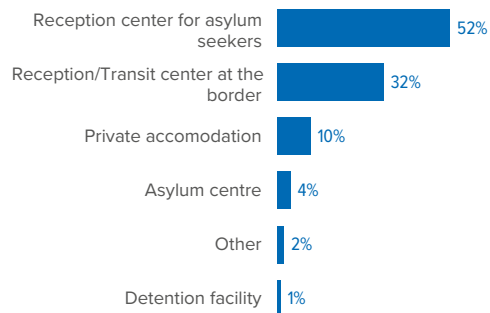


Access to Rights and Services in Host Countries

Accommodation: The majority (52%) of respondents reported residing in reception centers for asylum-seekers and migrants, likely due to the large number of interviews conducted in these locations. Ninety percent of respondents residing in this accommodation reported feeling safe, seven percent reported feeling neither safe nor unsafe, and three percent reported feeling unsafe. In comparison, more women living in reception centers for asylum seekers and migrants reported feeling unsafe than men (5% vs 3%). In some contexts, the lack of safety for women is tied to several factors, including the remoteness of the areas where reception centers are located. During focus group discussions, some women also reported feeling unsafe because of the proximity of their rooms to men’s rooms.

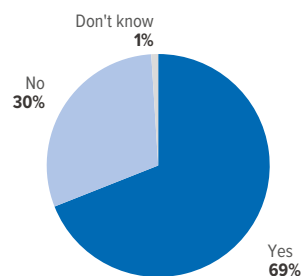
For 32% of respondents living in transit centers at the border, one of the main challenges identified is the inability to freely move in and out of the transit centers, with 19% reporting not being allowed to leave at all.

CURRENT ACCOMMODATION



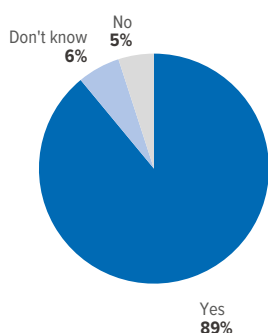
Legal counseling: Of those interviewed, 69% of respondents were provided with legal counseling and information. However, 30% of respondents reported not being able to access legal counseling and information, while 1% were unsure. In several countries, legal counseling is primarily or solely provided by humanitarian organizations. In some contexts, this is due to the absence of legal and institutional frameworks establishing the provision of legal aid. In other contexts, where there are legal and institutional frameworks in place, they are not systematically implemented mainly because of capacity constraints.

ACCESS TO LEGAL COUNSELING AND INFORMATION



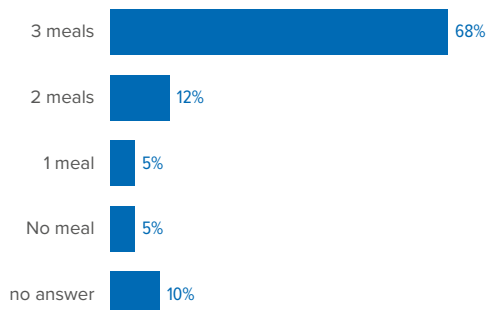
Healthcare: The vast majority of respondents (89%) reported having access to healthcare. However, 5% of respondents indicated they were unable to access healthcare, and 6% were unsure. During focus group discussions, participants frequently highlighted language barriers and the limited availability of general practitioners as the main obstacles to accessing healthcare.

ACCESS TO HEALTH



Food: While the regional average is 68%, in most countries more than 90% of respondents indicated having access to three meals per day.

ACCESS TO FOOD/MEALS PER DAY



Drivers of Onward Movements

Of those interviewed, 66% of respondents have a destination country in mind. For 42% of them, Germany is the main destination country, mostly because of family ties, employment opportunities, and/or safety. Another 18% of respondents indicated Italy as their intended destination country, with more than half citing employment opportunities as a reason.

Despite all respondents reporting a destination country different from their current host country, 44% of all respondents were willing to permanently stay in their current host country under certain conditions: if they are granted legal status (e.g., refugee status), the right to work, assistance with finding employment and/or an opportunity to reunite with their families.⁸ Conversely, 43% of the total respondents – mostly in Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia – indicated a desire to move elsewhere. The remaining 13% of respondents were either undecided or opted not to answer the question.

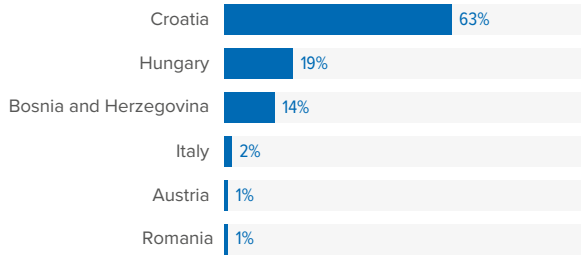
As this survey and focus group discussions revealed, a myriad of factors causes many people to consider leaving their host country, including lengthy asylum procedures and the granting of legal statuses with limited rights. Challenges in accessing rights in first countries of asylum also remain among the key factors for onward journeys. In this connection, of all those interviewed, seven percent of respondents had previously been recognized as refugees in other countries. When asked why they left their first country of asylum, most mentioned issues such as difficulties with social integration, safety concerns, complicated family reunification processes, and limited job opportunities.

8. It should be borne in mind that the survey does not distinguish between nuclear and extended family members

% OF RESPONDENTS WERE RETURNED WHILE TRYING TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY OF INTERVIEW (PUSHBACKS)

17%

COUNTRIES RESPONDENTS TRIED TO REACH WHEN THEY WERE RETURNED (PUSHBACKS)



% OF RESPONDENTS ARE WILLING TO PERMANENTLY STAY IN THE COUNTRY OF INTERVIEW UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS

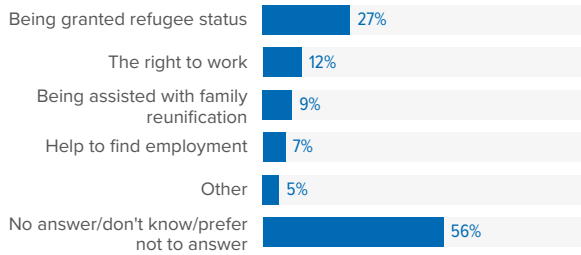
44%

% OF RESPONDENTS ARE NOT WILLING TO STAY PERMANENTLY IN THE COUNTRY OF INTERVIEW

43%

13% of respondents were undecided or chose not to answer

REPORTED PRECONDITIONS



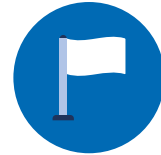
Key recommendations



1 UNHCR emphasizes the importance of **protection-sensitive entry and admission procedures**. Swift screening and admission of persons wishing to claim international protection is necessary to ensure effective access to asylum procedures.



2 UNHCR calls for the further strengthening of **national asylum systems to support fair and efficient status determination procedures**. To this end, UNHCR recommends implementing [differentiated procedures](#) for asylum-seekers. This approach will, among others, ensure the swift, safe, dignified return and readmission to their country of origin for those who do not have international protection needs or other legal grounds for stay.



3 UNHCR calls for more **financial, technical, and capacity-building support for first transit and hosting countries** to help them strengthen their asylum systems and government-provided services for the benefit of refugees and host communities, and to aid their efforts in promoting access to rights and livelihood opportunities.



4 UNHCR calls for more support, including **financial assistance, for non-EU host countries to help them promote the integration of international protection beneficiaries**. This includes facilitating access to livelihood opportunities, language courses, and promoting social cohesion.



5 UNHCR calls on countries to **establish new pathways for safe and orderly migration**. Efforts should also be made to ensure the viability and accessibility of regular pathways, such as family reunification, education pathways, and labour mobility opportunities.

Methodology

Protection monitoring enables UNHCR to develop evidence-based programmes and advocacy efforts grounded in the experiences of forcibly displaced and stateless individuals. In this context, UNHCR systematically gathers information on mixed movements in South-Eastern Europe. This includes interviewing individuals arriving in the region as part of mixed movements, to understand the motivations behind their journeys, their experiences while traveling, their opinions on available services, and their future intentions. During the first eight months of 2024, 3,237 interviews were conducted in nine countries/territories.

Given the fluidity of the target population, which limits the use of full probabilistic sampling methods, protection monitoring follows a convenience sampling approach, based on accessibility and availability of the target population to the enumerators at particular locations in a given country context, including in reception centres for asylum-seekers and migrants, transit centers and asylum centers. Operations aimed to minimize potential sampling bias by diversifying data collection locations and selecting respondents randomly rather than prioritizing specific profiles.

The results presented in this report should be considered only as indicative of the profiles and situation of the persons arriving or transiting in the covered locations during the first eight months of 2024, but they cannot be considered representative of all individuals engaged in mixed movements in the region.

Weights for regional analysis

Considering that the number of interviews in the countries under coverage varies depending on capacity and availability of the targeted population, for this regional analysis, a relative population weight was developed, using the following procedure:

- A targeted distribution of interviews per country was calculated based on the estimated number of new arrivals in the first half of 2024 as well the number of new asylum applications registered;
- A comparison between the distribution of interviews in the sample versus the targeted distribution was used to calculate the weights for each country.

COUNTRY	# interviews	% of interviews	Targeted distribution	Weights
Albania	186	6%	6%	1.03
Bosnia and Herzegovina	421	13%	13%	1.04
Bulgaria	972	30%	15%	0.50
Croatia	168	5%	12%	2.39
Kosovo (S/RES/1244(1999) *	321	10%	6%	0.62
Montenegro	361	11%	11%	0.95
North Macedonia	221	7%	13%	1.94
Romania	318	10%	15%	1.53
Serbia	269	8%	8%	1.00
TOTAL	3,237	100%	100%	

Sample description

Nationality	# of samples
Syrian Arab Rep.	1,384
Afghanistan	326
Morocco	280
Egypt	159
Pakistan	130
Others	958

Interview location	# of samples
Reception center	1,734
Transit center	784
Asylum Center	503
Detention center	44
UNHCR/partner office premises	30
Other	142

Duration since arrival in the interview country	# of samples
Less than 1 week ago	1,272
1 week or more but less 1 month	635
1 month or more but less than 3 months	525
3 months or more but less than 6	276
6 months or more but less than 1 year	240
1 year or more	289

	# of samples by age group and gender			Total by age group
	Female	Male	Others	
Below 18	2	73	-	75
18-24	97	1,105	4	1,206
25-59	277	1,630	11	1,918
60+	10	26	-	36
Unknow age		2	-	2
Total by gender	386	2,836	15	3,237

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DECEMBER 2024

