

MIXED MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE: UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE MOTIVATIONS AND INTENTIONS

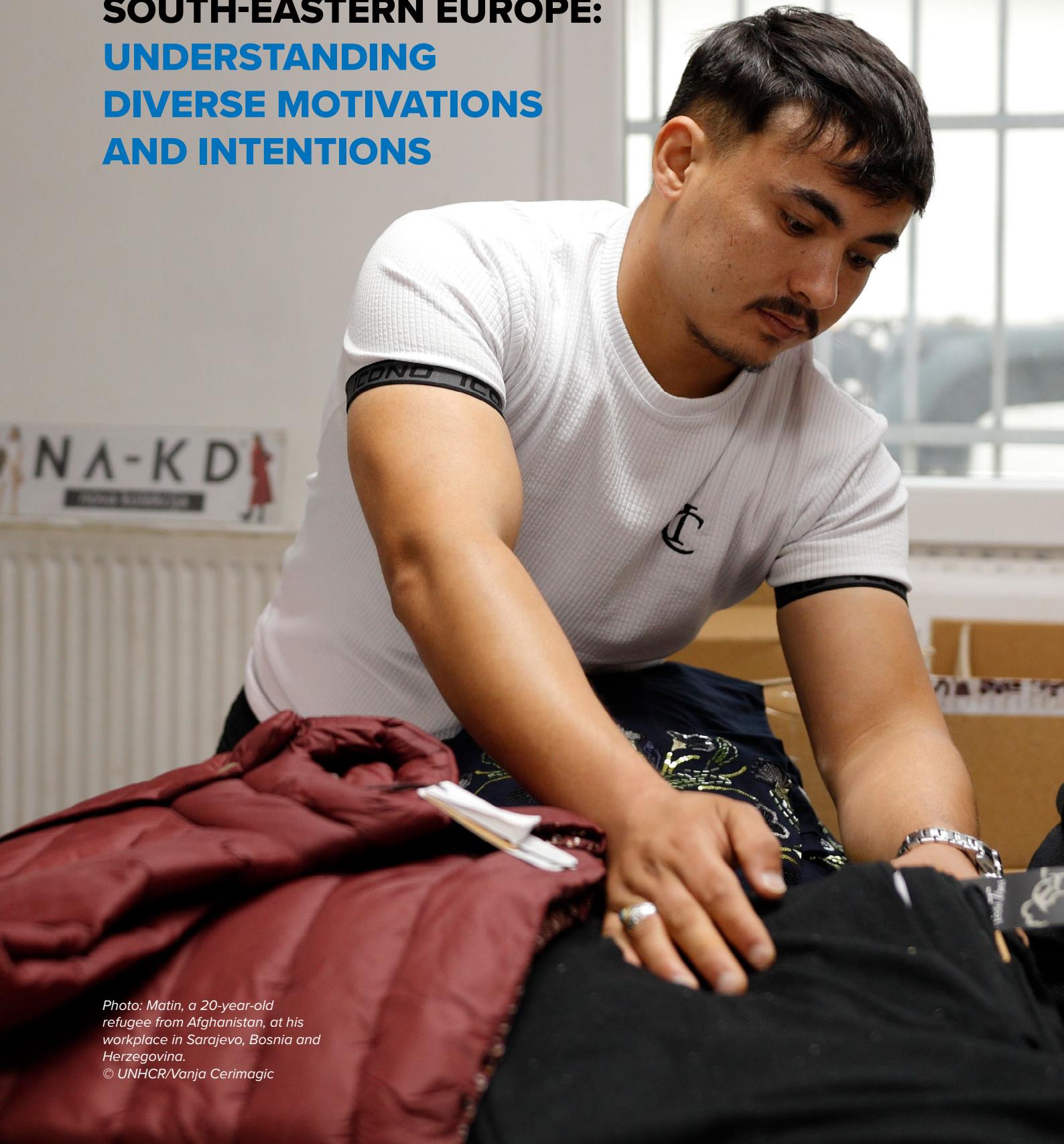


Photo: Matin, a 20-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, at his workplace in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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BACKGROUND

South-Eastern Europe remains one of the key regions in Europe witnessing mixed movements of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. The region serves both as a destination and a transit route for many individuals aiming to reach other parts of Europe. In the Western Balkans, a sub-region of South-Eastern Europe, an estimated 28,720 arrivals were recorded between January and October 2025.¹ Most arrivals were nationals of Egypt (21%), Afghanistan (21%), Morocco (10%), and Syria (7%).

To reach South-Eastern Europe, individuals often cross multiple countries – sometimes as many as 13, according to [UNHCR's survey](#). These journeys involve significant hardship, including days of walking under extreme weather conditions, limited access to food, and exposure to risks associated with smuggling and/or trafficking networks. For many, the journey does not end in South-Eastern Europe; they often continue onward to other European destinations with a desire to seek protection, reunite with family or secure better integration prospects. At the same time, a notable share is willing to settle permanently in South-Eastern Europe, particularly if they obtain legal status and access to employment.

One of the defining characteristics of mixed movements is the presence of migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees traveling along the same routes. However, this feature masks important differences among those on the move, including their reasons for leaving their countries of origin, their future movement intentions, and their protection needs. This, in turn, risks the development of similar policy and operational responses for individuals with very different motivations, intentions, and needs.

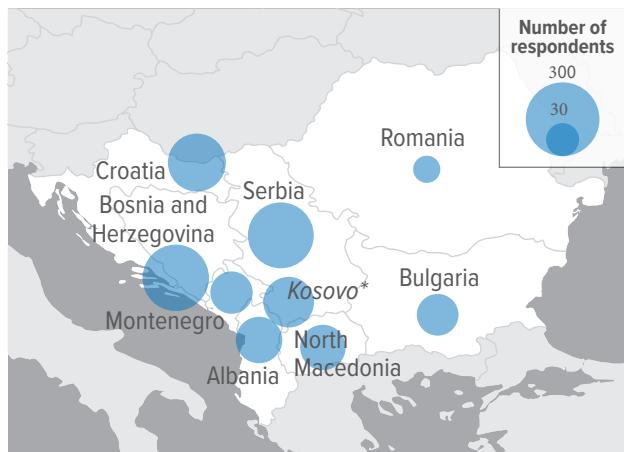
In this context, this report highlights key differences among individuals traveling as part of mixed movements based on their country of origin, classifying them into two categories: those from refugee-producing contexts and those from other countries whose nationals are generally not granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the European Union (EU). A 'refugee-producing context' is used to

describe a country from which significant numbers of people flee, and of whom a significant proportion are granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the EU. The experiences of respondents from 'refugee producing' countries are compared against those from other countries, whose nationals are generally not granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the EU. For the purposes of this report, nationals of Afghanistan,² Syria,³ and the State of Palestine⁴ are included under refugee-producing countries, while Egyptian⁵ and Moroccan⁶ nationals fall under countries whose nationals are generally not granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the EU and are hereinafter referred to as "others".

It is important to note, however, that even individuals from the same country may have different needs. While this classification highlights broader differences, it should not be interpreted as overlooking specific personal circumstances which can influence motivations, intentions, and protection needs.

The findings are based on a protection monitoring exercise conducted by UNHCR, in collaboration with its partners, across nine countries/territories in South-Eastern Europe⁷. This report, the third in the series (see [report #1](#), [report #2](#)), is based on interviews conducted with 1,400 individuals between March and December 2025.

Countries of interview



¹ This figure refers to detections at the borders, not unique individuals. Refugees and migrants may be detected multiple times as they move through several Western Balkan countries. UNHCR estimates that 8,500 refugees and migrants have transited through this region. Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/119862>

² 56% of decisions made on asylum applications from Afghan nationals in the EU between January and June 2025 resulted in a grant of either refugee status or subsidiary protection ('recognition rate'). Source: EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: January-June 2025, accessed at <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-january-june-2025/recognition-rates>

³ Recognition rate of 90% in the EU in 2024. Whilst the recognition rate for Syrian claims is reported as 17% between January-June 2025, EUAA explain that this shift does not reflect a stricter qualification for granting international protection to Syrians but appears to be driven largely by procedural factors (i.e. due to suspended decision making on Syrian claims, withdrawal of some asylum claims). Source: EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: January-June 2025.

⁴ Recognition rate 53% in the EU January-June 2025. Source: Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en>

⁵ Recognition rate 3% in the EU January-June 2025. Source: EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: January-June 2025.

⁶ Recognition rate 4% in the EU January-June 2025. Source: EUAA, Latest Asylum Trends: January-June 2025.

⁷ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Kosovo (references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244/1999)

KEY DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

Refugee producing countries

Number of respondents

727

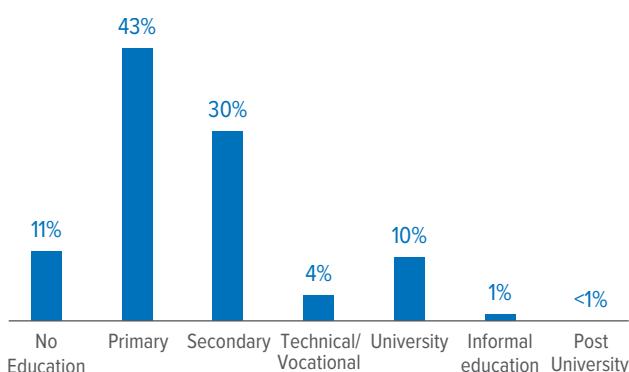
Gender



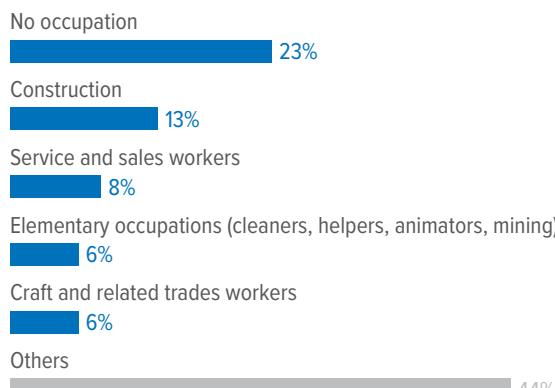
Average age of respondents

27

Education*



Top 5 recent occupation*



Others

Number of respondents

673

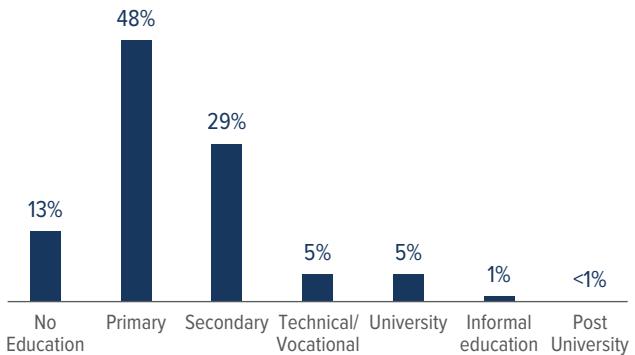
Gender



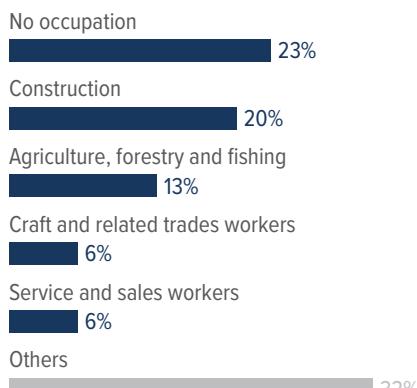
Average age of respondents

26

Education*



Top 5 recent occupation*



Refugee producing countries

51%

of respondents have at least one key documentation

Type of documents carried by respondents**

Attestation of Intention to seek asylum (AISA)

38%

Proof of asylum request from current country

31%

National passport

15%

ID card from country of origin

13%

Asylum seeker certificate (from previous country)

9%

Birth certificate

6%

Other

5%

Proof of refugee status from current country

2%

Others

36%

of respondents have at least one key documentation

Type of documents carried by respondents**

Attestation of Intention to seek asylum (AISA)

34%

National passport

30%

Proof of asylum request from current country

25%

Asylum seeker certificate (from previous country)

12%

ID card from country of origin

3%

Other

1%

ROUTE ANALYSIS

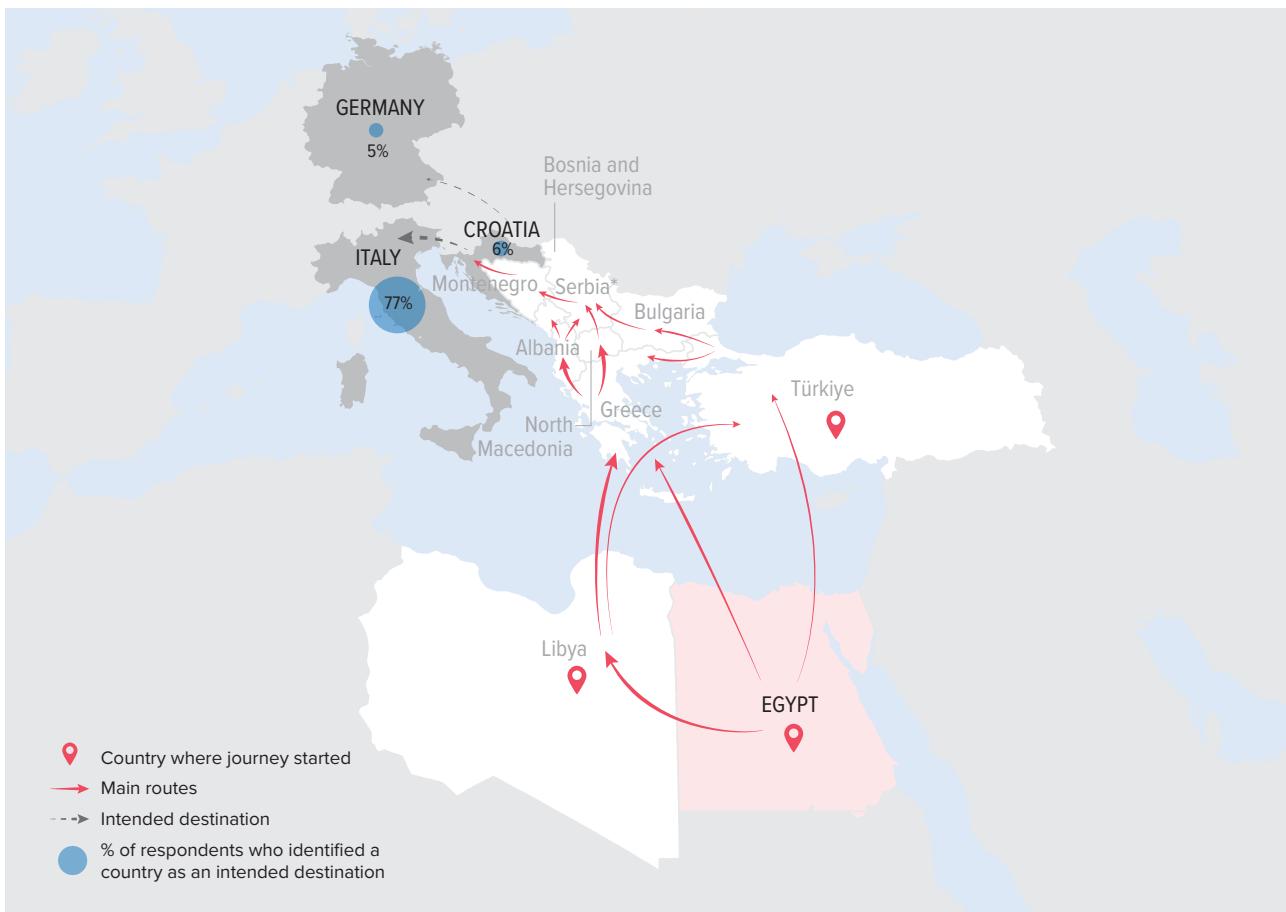
Main routes taken by Afghan nationals and intended destinations



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

- Half of Afghan nationals started their journey from Afghanistan. The remaining half began their journey from Pakistan (25%), Iran (22%), and Türkiye (3%).
- From Afghanistan, most traveled to Iran before eventually heading to Türkiye.
- A total of 98% of Afghan nationals passed through Türkiye at some point, including the 3% who started their journey there.
- From Türkiye, 48% traveled to Greece and 45% to Bulgaria.
- Of the 48% who went to Greece, 67% continued to North Macedonia and 25% to Albania.
- Of the 45% who went to Bulgaria, 72% traveled to Serbia, while the remaining stayed in Bulgaria or moved elsewhere.
- For the majority of Afghan nationals, Germany (29%), France (20%), and Italy (20%) are the main intended destination countries.

Main routes taken by Egyptian nationals and intended destinations



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

- The majority of Egyptian nationals started their journey from Egypt (73%), followed by Libya (22%) and Türkiye (4%).
- Among the 73% who started in Egypt, almost half (49%) traveled to Libya and around 20% to Türkiye.
- Of the 58% in Libya, including those who started there and those who first traveled from Egypt to Libya, 87% went to Greece, while 11% went to Türkiye. Greece is also the main transit country for

- those who started from or transited through Türkiye (29%), with 62% reaching Greece, followed by Bulgaria (31%).
- Of the 62% who traveled to Greece, most continued to North Macedonia (53%) and Albania (44%).
- Of the 31% who traveled to Bulgaria, all eventually moved on to Serbia.
- For 77% of Egyptians surveyed, Italy is their intended destination country.

KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS



Nine in 10 respondents from refugee-producing countries reported leaving their country of origin due to threats, insecurity, and discrimination. Conversely, an equivalent proportion of respondents from other countries reported leaving due to limited employment and access to basic services.

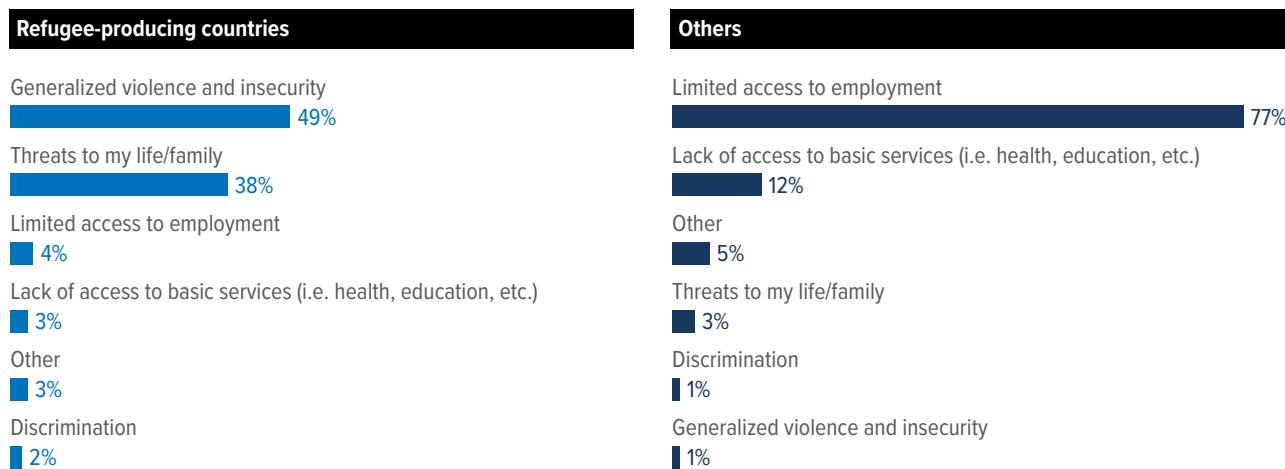
Unsurprisingly, marked differences are observed in the drivers of movement between respondents from refugee-producing countries and others.

Among respondents from refugee-producing countries, movement is overwhelmingly driven by protection concerns. A total of 91% of respondents reported leaving due to insecurity (49%), threats to their lives or family (38%) or discrimination (2%). Economic drivers are far less prominent, with only 7% citing limited employment opportunities or lack of access to

basic services. This pattern indicates predominantly forced movement, where safety and survival considerations outweigh economic motivations.

For respondents from other countries, the pattern is reversed. A total of 89% of respondents left due to either limited employment opportunities (77%) or lack of access to basic services (12%). Protection-related factors are reported by very small proportions only, including threats to life or family (3%), discrimination (1%), and insecurity (1%).

Reasons for leaving country of origin*



Germany emerges as the top intended destination for respondents from refugee-producing countries, while Italy is the main choice for others.

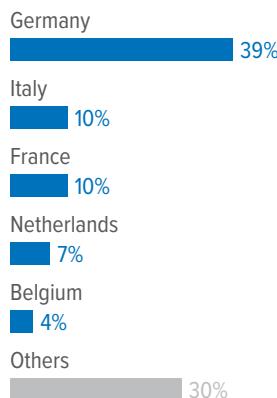
For respondents from refugee-producing countries, Germany is the main intended destination, reported by 39% of respondents. This is followed by Italy (10%) and France (10%), with smaller proportions distributed across other European countries. By contrast, respondents from other countries show a much stronger interest in Italy, which is the intended destination for 60% of respondents. Spain (15%) and France (8%) follow at some distance.

The factors influencing the choice of intended destination country also differ. Among respondents from refugee-producing countries, social ties are the most influential factors. Family ties (32%) and community ties (23%) are the two leading reasons for destination choice, followed by employment opportunities (19%). Access to asylum procedures and other factors play a secondary role, indicating that respondents seek to balance protection, social support, and longer-term stability.

For respondents from other countries, employment prospects mostly determine destination choice, cited by 59% of respondents. Community ties (13%) and family ties (13%) follow as secondary considerations. Other factors, including access to asylum procedures or education, are reported only by a minority.

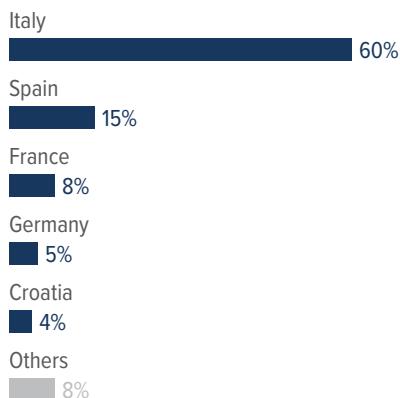
Refugee-producing countries

Top intended destination*

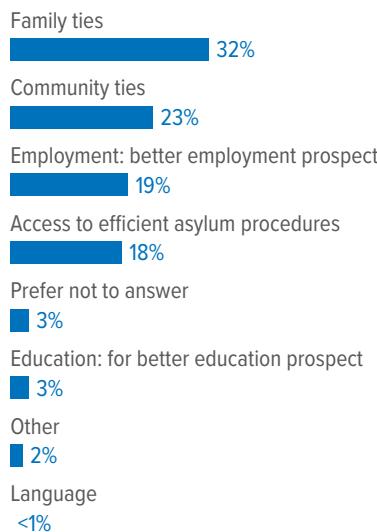


Others

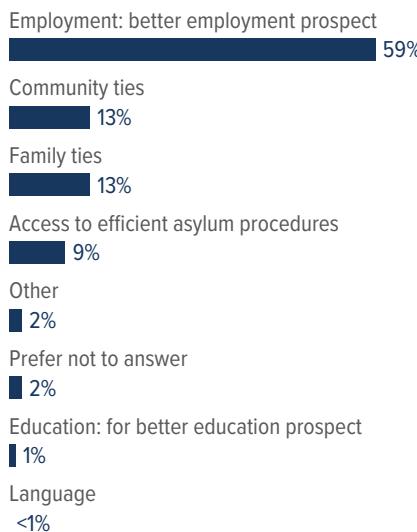
Top intended destination*



Reasons for travel to current intended destination*



Reasons for travel to current intended destination*





Respondents from refugee-producing countries more often expressed willingness to settle permanently in their current host country than others.

A sizable proportion of respondents from refugee producing countries (29%) expressed interest in remaining permanently in their current host country under certain conditions – more than twice the share of respondents from other countries (14%). Among refugee-producing country respondents who expressed interest in staying, obtaining legal status is the most decisive factor (74%), followed by access to the right to work (29%) and support in finding employment (26%).

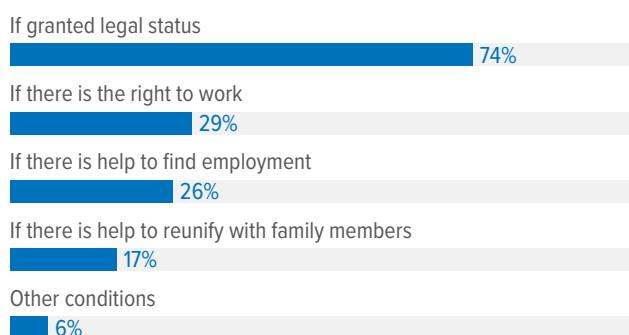
These findings indicate that many respondents from refugee producing countries are not fixed on a single destination, and that onward movement is driven less by attachment to a specific destination and more by

Refugee-producing countries

Intention to remain permanently in host country

29%

Conditions for permanently remaining in current host country**



the search for adequate protection and integration opportunities. This flexibility is further illustrated by reports from some respondents that changed their initial intended destination during their journey. Among respondents from refugee-producing countries, 9% reported a change in intended destination, including due to the perceived availability of better integration prospects in the new intended destination.

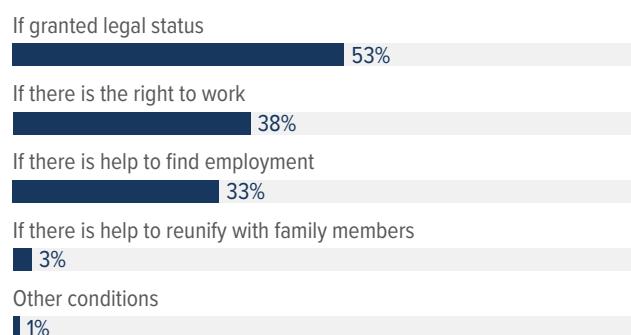
Changes in intended destination are comparatively less frequent among respondents from other countries (3%). Where such changes occur, they are primarily linked to perceived integration prospects in the new intended destination.

Others

Intention to remain permanently in host country

14%

Conditions for permanently remaining in current host country**



Limited access to rights drives onward movement, even among those granted international protection.

Respondents from countries whose nationals are generally not granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the EU were slightly more likely to report attempting to leave their current host country (40%) than those from refugee-producing countries (31%). In both groups, most reported that they were just transiting through the host country, with 60% of refugee-producing country respondents and 67% of respondents from other countries indicating this.

At the same time, respondents from refugee-producing countries described a wider range of additional pressures. Strong family or community ties

elsewhere were cited by 14%; difficulties accessing employment and family reunification procedures in their current host country were also reported.

Some of those who were previously granted international protection reported leaving their previous country of asylum due to integration-related challenges. Of those surveyed, 6% of respondents from refugee-producing countries had received international protection. Most left their previous country of asylum due to various obstacles, including limited access to employment opportunities and social-cohesion related challenges. These movements further illustrate how limited access to rights can drive onward movement.



Engagement with asylum procedures

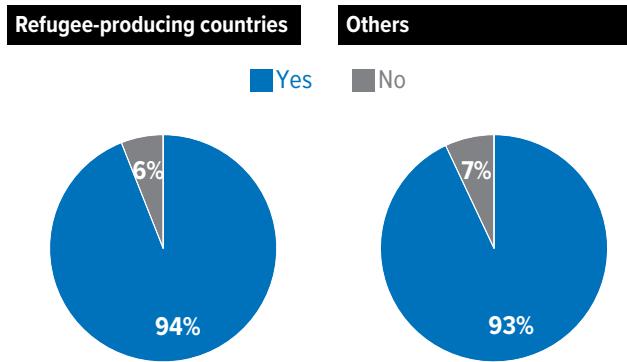
The survey indicates that both groups engage with national asylum systems, despite the very different factors driving their departure from their countries of origin.

In countries/territories implementing a one-step asylum application process⁷, 94% of respondents from refugee-producing countries reported applying for asylum. Similarly, 93% of respondents from other countries also reported applying for asylum in these countries, even though their reasons for leaving their countries of origin were primarily related to economic factors rather than international protection needs.

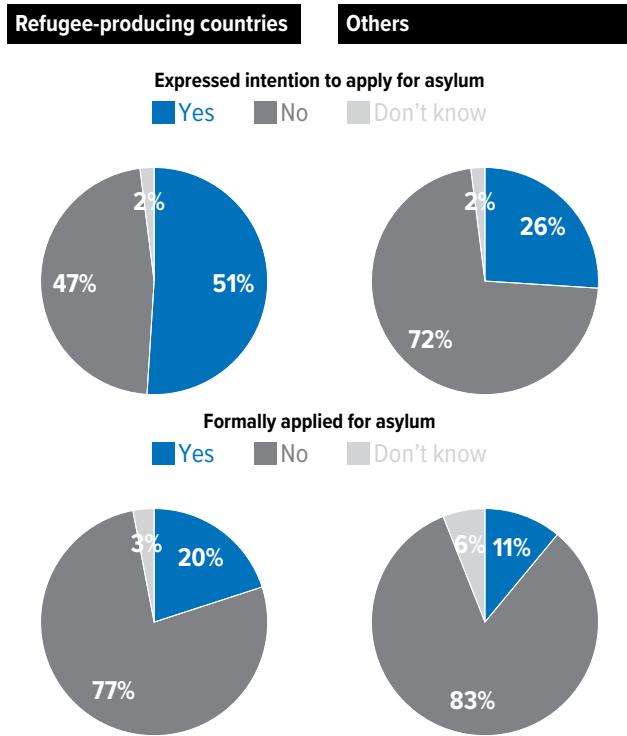
In countries with a two-step application process, engagement is also evident, although at different levels: 51% of respondents from refugee-producing countries and 26% from other countries expressed an intention to apply for asylum. However, only 20% and 11%, respectively, completed the formal application, mostly due to onward movement intentions. The higher proportion of respondents from other countries who expressed an intention to apply may partly be explained by practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this context, arrivals generally receive an attestation to seek asylum, regardless of their need for international protection.

Among those who formally applied for asylum, about half of applications remain pending in both groups. It is important to note, however, since the survey targeted individuals who have been in their host country for less than a year and did not capture application timelines, pending status does not necessarily indicate delays. Additionally, 40% of respondents in both groups reported being unaware of their application status, suggesting a potential communication gap.

One-step asylum application process



Two-step asylum application process



⁸ In three of the nine countries/territories where the survey was conducted (Bulgaria, Romania, and Kosovo*), a one-step asylum application process is in place allowing individuals to directly lodge their asylum application. Conversely, six of the nine countries/territories (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) implement a two-step process. First, individuals must express an intention to apply for asylum; second, they must formally lodge their application.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Develop and strengthen national asylum systems

UNHCR urges the continued strengthening of national asylum systems to ensure fair and efficient status determination processes. In particular, UNHCR recommends adopting differentiated procedures for asylum-seekers, quickly triaging cases into dedicated procedures according to their level of complexity and apparent protection needs. This approach will ensure early access to protection for those in need, and facilitate the prompt, safe, and dignified return of individuals who do not require international protection or have other legal grounds to remain.



Reduce onward movement by guaranteeing early access to rights and integration enablers for those likely to remain

A notable share of people from refugee-producing contexts would stay in their current host country if they can access legal status and work; at the same time, limited access to rights is a cited driver of onward movement, even among those already protected in other countries.

UNHCR calls for increased financial, technical, and capacity-building support for first transit, and hosting countries. This assistance should strengthen the capacity of national asylum systems to process cases fairly and efficiently and improve government-provided services for refugees and host communities. Additionally, it should foster the integration of individuals granted international protection by facilitating language training, access to employment, and initiatives that enhance social cohesion – ultimately helping to reduce dangerous onward movements.



Protect asylum systems by expanding and signaling accessible, regular pathways for non-protection cases

Many individuals involved in mixed movements, regardless of their motivation to leave their country of origin, use the asylum channel as the main available means to obtain legal stay, causing asylum systems to become backlogged and overwhelmed along the route. This negatively affects those in need of international protection while complicating State efforts to run effective asylum systems.

UNHCR encourages countries to expand pathways for safe and orderly migration. In this context, the expertise of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in supporting States to develop labour mobility schemes, skills partnerships, humanitarian visas, family reunification programmes and other regular migration mechanisms that address a range of mobility drivers can complement asylum systems. By investing in multiple regular pathways alongside robust, accessible asylum systems, States can better manage mixed movements, reduce reliance on dangerous routes and ensure that those in need of international protection can access asylum procedures in a timely and effective manner.

MATIN'S JOURNEY: FROM FEAR TO BELONGING IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Matin holds his drivers licence proudly in his home in Sarajevo. © UNHCR/Vanja Cerimagic

Matin was just 15 when he fled Afghanistan in 2020. Relentless armed attacks, the loss of schooling, and constant fear for his safety and future left him with no other choice.

"I came with smugglers to Iran together with my friend. After that, I was alone", he recalls. Iran was just the first stop. From there, Matin went to Türkiye, where he spent three years. Without identification documents and no clear path forward, he had to leave again. His journey continued through refugee camps in Greece, Albania and Montenegro, until he finally arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina in January 2023. "My life was constantly in danger", he says, remembering the nights filled with fear.

In 2023, a glimmer of hope appeared. Nine months after arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Matin was granted subsidiary protection status. This secured him the right to legally stay and access basic services, including healthcare, education, and the right to work.

The stability of Matin's future was confirmed through a project funded by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the international aid organization Catholic Relief Services (CRS). The project aims to foster economic inclusion of refugees and people in need of international protection through access to work.

As part of this project, UNHCR and CRS worked successfully with the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, local institutions, and civil society organizations. This collaboration ensured that refugees like Matin have the same opportunities as the local population to find a job through public employment schemes.

Through this initiative, Matin found a job in the warehouse of a Sarajevo textile company. Matin says he has found peace: "I feel safe. I have friends. I am happy here." He is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the community that accepted him.

Read the full story [here](#)

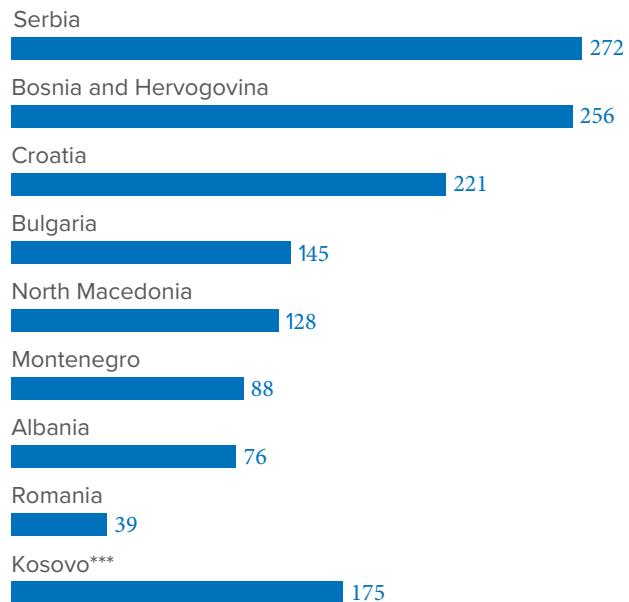
METHODOLOGY

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, in collaboration with its partners, 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. Between March and December 2025, protection monitoring interviews were conducted with 1,400 individuals in nine countries/territories. Interviews were conducted solely with individuals who have been in their current host country for one year or less.

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

The results in this report are indicative of the profiles and situations of individuals arriving or transiting at the covered locations during the reporting period. They should not be considered representative of all people engaged in mixed movements in the region.

Sample by country



*** References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)